



VAYERA

A JEWISH TAKE ON HOSPITALITY

Inviting Guests: Greater than Seeing G-d Himself

PARSHAH OVERVIEW

Vayera

G-d reveals Himself to Abraham three days after the first Jew's circumcision at age ninety-nine; but Abraham rushes off to prepare a meal for three guests who appear in the desert heat. One of the three—who are angels disguised as men—announces that, in exactly one year, the barren Sarah will give birth to a son. Sarah laughs.

Abraham pleads with G-d to spare the wicked city of Sodom. Two of the three disguised angels arrive in the doomed city, where Abraham's nephew Lot extends his hospitality to them and protects them from the evil intentions of a Sodomite mob. The two guests reveal that they have come to overturn the place and to save Lot and his family. Lot's wife turns into a pillar of

salt when she disobeys the command to not look back at the burning city as they flee.

While taking shelter in a cave, Lot's two daughters (believing that they and their father are the only ones left alive in the world) get their father drunk, lie with him, and become pregnant. The two sons born from this incident father the nations of Mo'ab and Ammon.

Abraham moves to Gerar, where the Philistine king Abimelech takes Sarah—who is presented as Abraham's sister—to his palace. In a dream, G-d warns Abimelech that he will die unless he returns the woman to her husband. Abraham explains that he feared he would be killed over the beautiful Sarah.

G-d remembers His promise to Sarah and gives her and Abraham a son, who is named Isaac (Yitzchak, meaning "will laugh"). Isaac is circumcised at the age of eight days; Abraham is one hundred years old and Sarah ninety at their child's birth.

Hagar and Ishmael are banished from Abraham's home and wander in the desert; G-d hears the cry of the dying lad and saves his life by showing his mother a well.

Abimelech makes a treaty with Abraham at Beersheba, where Abraham gives him seven sheep as a sign of their truce.

Is one obligated to keep inviting a guest even if the guest causes significant inconvenience?



RASHI'S RULES

1. Rashi only translates words if the translation is not obvious.
2. Rashi always translates words the first time they appear in the Torah.
3. Rashi only uses two explanations when each is incomplete.
4. Of the two explanations, the first will always be a better fit with the plain meaning of the text.
5. Rashi only cites the source of his translations or explanations when it helps to explain something.

TEXT 1A

Genesis 18:2–3

ב. וַיָּרֵץ לְקִרְאָתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אֶרְצָה.
ג. וַיֹּאמֶר, אֲ-דֹנָי אִם נָא מָצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֵל נָא
תַעֲבֹר מֵעַל עַבְדְּךָ.

2. He ran toward them from the opening of his tent and prostrated himself to the ground.

3. And he said, “My lord, If I have found favor in your eyes, please do not pass your servant by.”

TEXT 1B

Rashi, ad loc.

לְגָדוֹל שְׂבָקָם אָמַר, וּקְרָאם כְּלָם אֲדוֹנָיִם. וְלִגְדוֹל אָמַר "אֵל נָא תַעֲבֹר", וְכִיּוֹן שְׁלֹא יַעֲבֹר
הוּא, יַעֲמְדוּ תְּחִבְרִי עִמּוֹ. וּבְלִשׁוֹן זֶה הוּא חָל.

דָּבָר אַחֵר קִדְּשׁ הוּא, וְהִיא אוֹמֵר לְהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְהַמְתִּין לוֹ עַד שְׁפִירוּץ וְיִכְנִיס אֶת
הָאוֹרְחִים . . .

וּשְׁתִּי הַלְשׁוֹנוֹת בְּבְרָאשִׁית רַבָּה.

He was talking to the leader [of the angels], but addressed them all as lords. He addressed the words “Please do not pass your servant by” to the leader [but he intended for all three to stay]; if the leader would stay, so would his companions. According to this version, אֲדוֹנַי refers to the mundane [interlocutor, not to G-d].

Another explanation: it (אֲדוֹנַי) is a sacred honorific, and he was telling G-d to wait for him as he ran to tend to the wayfarers.

Both interpretations are found in Midrash, *Bereshit Rabah*.

QUESTIONS

1. Why does Rashi offer two explanations?
2. Why did Rashi begin with the unusual translation? In most cases, this honorific refers to G-d. Why not simply say Abraham was talking to G-d and leave the unusual translation for later?
3. Why does Rashi conclude by citing the source of the translations?

TEXT 2

Genesis 18:4–5

ד. יִקַּח נָא מְעֵט מַיִם וְרַחֲצוּ רַגְלֵיכֶם, וְהִשְׁעֲנוּ תַּחַת הָעֵץ.
ה. וְאֶקְחָה פֶת לֶחֶם וְסַעְדוּ לְבַבְכֶם אַחַר תַּעֲבְרוּ כִּי עַל כֵּן
עֲבַרְתֶּם עַל עַבְדְּכֶם, וַיֹּאמְרוּ, כֵּן תַעֲשֶׂה כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ.

4. “Please let some water be taken to bathe your feet and [then] recline under the tree.

5. “And I will fetch some bread to sustain your hearts, and then you can travel onward, for [after all] you have passed by your servant.” And they said, “We will do as you said.”

TEXT 3

*The Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem
Mendel Schneerson, Likutei
Sichot 20, p. 69*

ויבאלד אז פאר "יוקח נא" שטייט ניט נאכאמאל "ויאמר" איז
פארשטאנדיק, אז דאס אלץ . . . איין אמירה . . .

און היות אז "יוקח נא מעט מים ורחצו רגליכם גו'" האט אברהם געזאגט צו
די "שלשה אנשים", פארשטייט דער בן חמש למקרא (בפשטות), אז אויך
די התחלת האמירה . . . איז געזאגט געווארן (ניט צום אויבערשטן, נאר) צו
די "שלשה אנשים".

Considering that verse four does not begin with the words, "and he said," it follows that verses three and four comprise a single statement.

If the offer for water was made to the wayfarers, the five-year-old understands that the beginning of the statement was also not directed at G-d, but at the wayfarers.

ANSWER 2

Rashi opens with Abraham addressing the wayfarers as the first option because even though it's not the usual use of the honorific, it makes more sense to the child because of the flow of the passages.

TEXT 4

*The Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem
Mendel Schneerson, ibid.*

פארוואס האט אברהם אנגעהייבן רעדן צו די
"שלשה אנשים" (ניט בלשון רבים, נאר) בלשון
יחיד?

Why didn't Abraham greet in the plural?

Why did he talk to three people in singular
language?

RASHI'S QUESTION

Why didn't Abraham address the wayfarers in plural form? Was he only addressing one person?



TEXT 5A

Rashi, Genesis 18:3

לְגֵדוֹל שִׁבְקֵהֶם אָמַר.

Abraham was talking to the leader [of the three wayfarers].

TEXT 5B

Rashi, ibid.

וְקָרָאֵם כְּלָם אֲדוֹנַיִם.

He addressed them all as lords.

TEXT 5C

Rashi, ibid.

וְלִגְדוֹל אָמַר אֵל נָא תַעֲבֹר, וְכִיּוֹן
שֶׁלֹא יַעֲבֹר הוּא יַעֲמְדוּ חֲבֵרָיו עִמּוֹ.

He addressed the leader with the words, “Please do not pass by,” [but he intended for all three to stay] because if the leader would stay, so would his companions.

RASHI'S ANSWERS

Abraham spoke in the singular because he was addressing only the leader. However, when he said “my lord,” he was referring to each of them individually. The reason why Abraham only addressed the leader was because he was confident that if the leader stopped, the others would follow.

ANSWER 1

Rashi brings two explanations because both contain slight flaws that bother the five-year-old.

ANSWER 3

By concluding that both explanations come from the Midrash, Rashi is indicating to his students that the reason neither explanation is perfect is because the Midrash does not focus on the plain meaning of the text.



How could Abraham leave G-d's presence to tend to guests?

TEXT 6A

The Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Likutei Sichot 25, pp. 70–71

אין א מצב פון "וירא אליו ה'", ווי פאסט עס אז בעת מעשה זאל אברהם קוקן און דערזען "שלשה אנשים" זען בשימת לב (וועלכע בריינגט צו וירץ לקראתם)?

בשעת מען שטייט "לפני ה'" דארף דאך זיין מושלל יעדער תנועה, ועל אחת כמה וכמה שימת לב, צו א מענטשן אדער צו עפעס אן אנדער זאך! . . .

על אחת כמה וכמה ביי אברהם וואס זיין "עומד לפני ה'" איז געווען באופן הכי גדול ונעלה . . . איז ווי קומט עס אז באותה שעה זאל ביי עם זיין . . . אז ער האט דערזען די ג' אנשים?

Abraham was in a state where "G-d revealed Himself to him." In this state, how could he look at, let alone notice, the three wayfarers? How could he pay them enough heed to be impelled to run toward them?

When standing before G-d, even a single unnecessary bodily motion is out of the question. Paying such close attention to anyone or anything is perforce proscribed.

[This would be true of anyone standing before G-d.] How much more so Abraham, whose experience of standing before G-d was so much more powerful and superior. . . . How could he at the very same time . . . notice the three wayfarers?

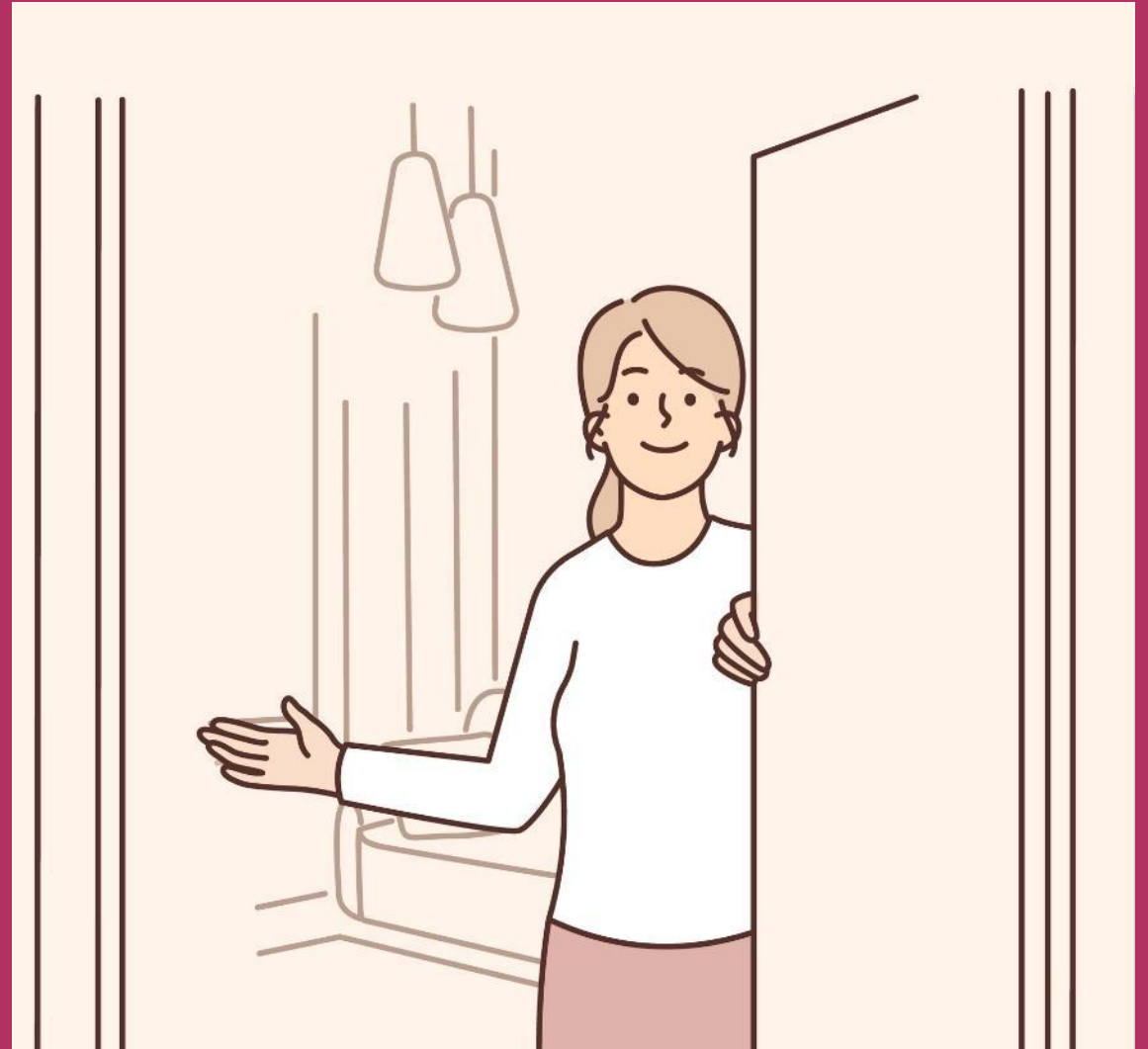
TEXT 6B

Talmud, Shabbat 127a

אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר רַב: גְּדוּלָּהּ הַכְּנֻסָּת אוֹרְחִין
מִהַקְּבֵלָת פְּנֵי שְׂכִינָה, דְּכָתִיב: "וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אִם נָא
מְצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֵל נָא תֵעָבֶר".

Rabbi Yehudah said in the name of Rav, “Hospitality is greater than hosting G-d. As the passage states, ‘And he said: My lord, if I have found favor in your eyes, do not pass your servant by.’”

Abraham leaving
G-d's presence to tend to
his guests tells us that
hospitality is more
important than hosting G-
d.



QUESTION

How did Abraham know that leaving G-d to care for guests was correct and acceptable?

TEXT 7

Rabbi Chaim Alter Paneth,
Tapuchei Chayim, p. 18

ויש לומר על פי מה שכתוב בספרי הקדושים, דהצדיק מקדש את אבריו עד שהולכים מעצמם לעשות רצון ה'. וכמו שאמר דוד המלך: "רגלי מוליכות אותי לבית המדרש" (סוכה כג, א).

והנה, אברהם אבינו - רגליו רצו לקראת האורחים, אף על פי שהשכינה היתה שרויה בביתו באותה שעה. ומזה הבין שהכנסת אורחים גדולה יותר. וזהו שכתוב: "וירא, וירץ לקראתם". פירוש, ראה שהוא רץ מאליו לקראת האורחים, ולמד מזה שמצוה זו גדולה יותר מקבלת פני השכינה.

We can explain this based on what is written in sacred tomes: that utterly righteous people sanctify their limbs until they move spontaneously to do G-d's bidding. This is why King David said, "My feet carry me to the house of study" (Talmud, Sukkah 23a).

Abraham's feet ran toward the guest, though G-d was present in his home. This told Abraham that hospitality is more important. This is the meaning of the passage, "And he saw, . . . and he ran toward them" (Genesis 18:3). He saw that he was running spontaneously toward the guest. From this, he discerned that this *mitzvah* was greater than hosting the Divine.

ANSWER

The fact that Abraham's feet lifted him and took him toward the guests told him that hospitality is more important.

TEXT 8

Talmud, Sotah 14a

וְאָמַר רַבִּי חָמָא בְּרַבִּי חַנִּינָא, מַאי דְכָתִיב:
"אַחֲרַי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם תֵּלְכוּ" (דְּבָרִים יג,
ה), וְכִי אֶפְשָׁר לוֹ לְאָדָם לְהֵלֵךְ אַחֲרַי
שְׂכִינָה? וְהֲלֹא כָבָר נֶאֱמַר "כִּי ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ
אִשׁ אוֹכֵלָה הוּא" (שָׁם ד, כד).

אֵלָּא, לְהֵלֵךְ אַחֲרַי מְדוּתָיו שֶׁל הַקְּדוֹשׁ
בְּרוּךְ הוּא: מָה הוּא מְלַבֵּשׁ עֲרוּמִים . . .
אִם אֶתְּהַלְבֵּשׁ עֲרוּמִים. הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ
הוּא בִּיקָר חוֹלֵי . . . אִם אֶתְּהַבֵּיב
חוֹלִים. הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא נִיחֵם אֲבֵלִים
. . . אִם אֶתְּהַנַּחֵם אֲבֵלִים. הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ
הוּא קָבַר מֵתִים . . . אִם אֶתְּהַקְּבֹר
מֵתִים.

Rabbi Chama the son of Rabbi Chanina said, "What is the meaning of the passage, 'Walk behind G-d, your G-d?' (Deuteronomy 13:5)? Is it even possible to walk behind G-d if the Torah states, 'G-d your G-d is a consuming fire' (Deuteronomy 4:24)?"

"Rather, it means to emulate G-d's traits. As G-d clothes the naked, . . . so should you. As G-d visits the sick, . . . so should you. As G-d comforts the mourner, . . . so should you. As G-d buries the dead, . . . so should you."



When we run to host a guest, we are not leaving G-d behind. We are drawing near to G-d by doing precisely as He would do. Hosting G-d's child demonstrates our love for G-d.

TEXT 9

Rabbi Eliyahu Moyal, Imrei
Eliyahu (Holon, Israel, 2000),
p. 89

סיבת הגדולה שבדבר מבאר בעל
נתיבות שלום.

לפי שאם אתה מקבל פני אוהבך
בשמחה אין בזה רבותא. אבל כשאתה
מקבל את בן אוהבך בשמחה, ואינך שש
בו ומכבדו אלא רק מפני שבנו של
אוהבך הוא, הרי זה סימן מובהק לגודל
אהבה השוררת ביניכם. לולא אהבתכם
מה לבנו של פלוני ולך?

כשיהודי בא בצל קורתך ואתה מכבדו
על כי בן המלך הוא, בנו של הקדוש
ברוך הוא . . . הרי זה מוכיח על אהבת
ה' הבוערת בקרבך - הרבה יותר מאשר
אם תקבל בכבוד את פני השכינה עצמה.

The reason why this is so great is explained
by [Rabbi Boruch Sholom Berezofski, the
Rebbe of Slonim and author of] *Netivot
Shalom*.

If you greet your friend with joy, it doesn't
demonstrate the true extent of your
friendship. Greeting his child with joy,
rejoicing only because it is your friend's
child, demonstrates the great love you have
for your friend. If not for your friendship,
why would you associate with this child?

When you honor Jews in your home
because they are G-d's children, . . . you
demonstrate the love for G-d that burns in
you, much more so than receiving G-d
Himself with pomp and ceremony.

If we would walk away from G-d to invite a guest, how much more so does this principle apply with regard to giving up on work and certainly leisure?



TEXT 10

*Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov,
Keter Shem Tov Hashalem
301:1*

עוד שמעתי ממורי הבעל
שם טוב, זכר לחיי העולם
הבא, ביאור "גדולה
הכנסת אורחים מהקבלת
פני שכינה". והקשה.
והעולה, אף שלפעמים
הכנסת אורחים הוא
ביטול תורה, על ידי
סיפורים או סיפורי לשון
הרע וכו', מכל מקום,
"גדולה הכנסת אורחים".

My mentor, the Baal Shem Tov, taught me the meaning of our sages' statement that hosting our fellow is greater than hosting G-d.

He asked [since G-d doesn't reveal Himself to us, how does this statement apply to us? The answer is that we host G-d when we study the Torah].

Accordingly [the meaning of our sages' statement is this]: although hospitality prevents us sometimes from studying the Torah, and causes us to engage in idle chatter, gossip, etc., it is still the greater merit.



No *mitzvah* is greater than the *mitzvah* of hospitality.

KEY POINTS

1. There are two ways to read Abraham's opening statement. He was either addressing G-d in apology as he ran to welcome his guests, or he was addressing his guests.
2. Either way, Abraham left G-d's presence to welcome guests. This teaches us that the *mitzvah* of hospitality is greater than hosting G-d.
3. When we practice kindness, we emulate G-d. When we welcome a guest, we act in G-d's stead. It is like G-d is welcoming the guest through us.
4. Running to welcome a guest in the middle of Torah study is like leaving G-d's presence to welcome His child. This demonstrates our ultimate love for G-d.
5. The *mitzvah* of hospitality is more important than personal convenience or spiritual comfort.

TEXT 11

Yael Trusch, "Why Help Others?" www.jhvonline.com

There was once a childless Jewish couple named Eliezer and Sarah. Everyone knew of their outstanding hospitality. Once, an unkempt beggar asked to stay with them for Shabbat, and Eliezer and Sarah agreed.

The man was a handful, to say the least. He complained about everything. No matter what they gave him, he demanded more and more and had the chutzpah to get angry when they couldn't fulfill his incessant requests. He prolonged his stay beyond Shabbat, still criticizing everything.

Eliezer and Sarah continued to treat him with patience and respect despite his rude behavior. They went out of their way to make him feel as comfortable as possible.

Before he finally left, the beggar revealed himself as Eliyahu Hanavi, Elijah the prophet. He had been sent to test the couple. They passed the test admirably and, thus, would be rewarded with a son who would light up the world with his Torah and love for others.

A year later, they had a baby boy, who grew up to become the famous Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, whose hallmark was love of every Jew.

