

The Path to Follow

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HOW FAR SHOULD HOSPITALITY EXTEND?

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

It is written, "And he said, 'My L-rd, if I find favor in Your eyes, please pass not away from your servant'" (Bereshith 18:3).

After Abraham received the order to circumcise himself, Hashem went to visit him when He saw how greatly he was suffering. Yet when Abraham noticed guests at a distance, he asked Hashem to wait so he could run out to meet them, as Rashi explains. From here, the Sages tell us, we learn that "hospitality is greater than welcoming the Shechinah."

We may ask the following question: In tractate Berachot we read that it is forbidden to stop in the middle of prayer to greet someone. Even if a king is passing before us as we are praying, we are forbidden to stop. This is due to the fact that we are standing before the King of kings at that point, and we must show Him even more respect than a human king. Yet here Abraham left the presence of Hashem in order to run out and meet guests! Why does the Halachah not allow us to interrupt our prayer in order to fulfill the mitzvah of demonstrating hospitality, as Abraham did?

We may also ask – since the Halachah does not allow this, meaning that we are not permitted to interrupt our prayers in order to welcome guests – why Abraham did just that. To these questions, which I put before the students of Rabbi Yehonatan Lugassy, I responded, after some reflection, that ordinary people sense Hashem's presence when they are standing before Him during Shemoneh Esrei. It is only then that they sense the full power of His presence, whereas in normal life they have no opportunity to sense it. On the other hand, Abraham could sense the reality of G-d at every moment of his life, which is apparently why every instant he was doing something mundane was considered as an interruption for him, since he was continually living in the shadow of Hashem's presence.

In reality, nowhere do we find that Abraham was excessively criticized for having excused himself before Hashem for the sake of a mundane matter. We may therefore conclude that although Abraham departed from the Shechinah in order to welcome guests, that was what he needed to do, for the reality of the Shechinah wasn't something new to Abraham, given that he constantly lived in Hashem's presence for his entire life.

As for ourselves – ordinary human beings who don't even reach Abraham's level – we only sense Hashem's reality when we are standing before Him in prayer. Now because these are precious moments in a Jew's life, we must derive all that we can and take away spiritual sustenance from such occasions. Hence the Halachah forbids us from interrupting our prayers in order to welcome guests. The verse,

"Abraham was advanced in days" (Bereshith 24:1) signifies that Abraham had control over his days and did with them as he pleased, meaning that his days did not control him. As for ourselves and our days, there are numerous people who claim that they don't have any free time and are not in control of their time. This is because they are controlled by time rather than being in control of their time. As for Abraham, who served G-d throughout his life and felt His presence at every instant, he could interrupt himself in the middle of Hashem's visit in order to go out and greet guests. As for ourselves, who have not reached such a high level, we are forbidden from acting in the same way, and hopefully we can at least sense Hashem's presence during Shemoneh Esrei.

When the King's Anger is Not Aroused

We also need to explain why demonstrating hospitality is actually more important than welcoming the Shechinah. We may explain this by saying that Abraham had a goal that was a sign unto itself, namely to lead the people of his generation to repentance and draw them closer to their heavenly Father. If a person warms his hands by a fire, it is inevitable that anyone who touches his hands will in turn be warmed. Likewise, because Abraham was entirely infused with Torah, with the fear of Heaven, and with a love of G-d, guests who ate at his home would also absorb this spiritual heat and acknowledge G-d's presence in the world. Welcoming guests precedes the welcoming of the Shechinah only when the Shechinah is constantly with someone, as was the case with Abraham. That being the case, leaving the Shechinah and going out to meet guests was not considered an interruption because the reality of Hashem was continuous and did not depend on any particular moment in time. Yet for someone who has not yet reached such a level, it is clear that welcoming the Shechinah takes precedence over demonstrating hospitality, which is why we are not allowed to interrupt our Shemoneh Esrei prayer even for a king.

The situation is like a king who is invited to his friend's home every day, an invitation that the king always accepts, going to meet his friend every day. If, for whatever reason, his friend cannot meet him one day, the king will not be upset because he is often in his presence. However if the king only visits his friend one single time, and yet his friend is absent then, the king's anger will certainly be aroused. The same applies to Abraham: Since the Shechinah was constantly with him, the King's anger was not aroused when Abraham went out to meet guests, for demonstrating hospitably takes precedence over welcoming the Shechinah only when a person has reached the level of constantly sensing Hashem's presence throughout his life.

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Concerning the Parsha

Praying with a Minyan: Like a Lift-Truck in Action

It is written, “What if there should be 50 righteous in the midst of the city?” (Bereshith 18:24).

In his commentary on the Torah, the Hizkuni (Rabbi Hezekiah ben Manoah) draws our attention to a surprising element of Abraham’s argument: Abraham initially asks for Sodom to be saved in case there are 50 righteous men in it. He then reduces this number to 45, and then to 40. In the next stage, he proceeds to 30, then to 20, and finally to 10. Why does Abraham change his numbering scheme? That is, he initially reduces the necessary number of righteous men by intervals of five, but then he reduces it by intervals of ten!

The Hizkuni responds by saying that Abraham’s supplication concerned not only Sodom, but also the surrounding cities of Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Lasha.

Abraham was trying to save these cities by the merit of a minyan (10 tzaddikim) in each location: If there were 10 tzaddikim, G-d would spare them from cataclysmic destruction. Thus 50 tzaddikim would correspond to 10 per city. Abraham then reduced the number to 45, thinking that G-d would join Himself with them as the tenth for each city. Abraham then prayed only for four cities (hence the number 40), then for three (hence then number 30), then for two, and finally for a single city, at which point he stopped. According to the book *Barchi Nafshi*, from here we learn the importance of the minyan, meaning that such a gathering bestows tremendous power to the group. The author of *Seder HaYom* explains that the greatest satisfaction for the Divine Name is achieved by whoever gathers nine men around himself (he himself being the tenth) to speak words of Torah. Such a man is praised because he “gathers groups in public.”

The following story, which took place in a kollel located in the United States, illustrates the power of a minyan:

To encourage the avrechim and push them to carefully study Torah, the Rosh Kollel made an agreement with a toy manufacturing company (whose owner was a Torah-loving man) to reward his most diligent avrech with an original gift. Hence the Rosh Kollel announced to them: “Whoever turns out to be the most diligent in learning throughout the semester will be allowed to enter a toy warehouse for 10 minutes and take whatever he wishes for his children.”

At the end of the semester, the avrech noted for his diligence went to the toy warehouse to receive his reward.

The owner of the company warmly welcomed him, brought him into his office, and hugged and kissed him, thus expressing his great respect for Torah. He then gave him his long-awaited permission to enter the warehouse and take whatever he desired.

The Rosh Kollel stood to the side and watched as the avrech approached the warehouse shelves and chose the best toys to bring home to his children. As for the owner, who truly loved Torah, he shared in the avrech’s joy and later told the Rosh Kollel: “I knew that I had some part in the Torah of that man, and I did it with great joy.”

Now the merchandise in the factory was quite heavy, and the avrech couldn’t carry everything at once. He therefore had to go back and forth from the shelves to the location in the factory where he had deposited some boxes.

He filled one box, then another. One minute passed, then the next...until soon five minutes had expired...and shortly thereafter 10 minutes were gone! The man was covered in sweat and breathing heavily, having made a tremendous effort to use all the time allotted to him. All in all, he filled 18 boxes with toys that he had joyfully selected for his children, who were impatiently awaiting him at home.

Not long afterwards, when the Rosh Kollel came to thank the owner for his generous cooperation, the latter declared: “I was surprised that your talented avrech didn’t use every opportunity presented to him. True, he left the store with 18 boxes filled with toys, but he could have left with much more!”

“How so?” asked the Rosh Kollel. The man replied, “In the factory there’s a lift-truck used to move merchandise. If he had used it to bring toys to his boxes, he could have taken a much greater amount of toys, and in the space of 10 minutes he could have cleaned out our stock. Yet that’s not what he did. Instead he took toys one by one, leavening with only 18 boxes of toys.”

This story illustrates the immense difference between an individual prayer and one said with a minyan. In fact while an individual who prays alone is only supported by his own merits, ten Jews who pray together are using a “lift-truck” approach, meaning that the merits of all who pray are attributed to each person who prays. As such, the benefits to each person in the minyan increase substantially.

Guard Your Tongue

Even if it’s the Complete Truth

It is forbidden to spread gossip, even if we are saying something true, without even the shadow of falsehood, and even in the absence of the person concerned, claiming that we would say it in his presence. How much more is it forbidden, as well as a grave sin, to have the audacity of saying in the presence of the subject himself: “You spoke about So-and-so, and you did such-and-such to him.”

Rabbi Haim Pinto Hakatan

Taking place this week is the Hilloula of a spiritual giant, a tzaddik for whom miracles were commonplace, Rabbi Haim Pinto Hakatan. A descendant of the glorious Pinto family, whose members lived and were active in Morocco, Rabbi Haim Pinto helped the community both in the spiritual and material domain, as well as bringing Jews closer to their Creator in his life and even after his death.

In this article, we shall illustrate the greatness of this tzaddik by means of a story told in the book *Shenot Haim*. It involves the governor of Mogador, a man who was a committed enemy of Israel. Yet after a certain incident, his attitude radically changed and he became a friend of the Jewish people. What happened is the following:

The governor took great delight in mistreating Jews and troubling them at every instance. Rabbi Haim was no exception, and the governor loved to annoy him from time to time. One day, as Rabbi Haim was walking with one of his students past the residence of the governor, the enemy of Israel, he saw them through a window and immediately ordered his servants to fetch them.

His servants, aware of the tzaddik's greatness, tactfully pointed out to their master that "this man is one of the great Jewish sages of the city. Perhaps it would be better not to disturb him." However the governor, far from being impressed, reiterated his order to his servants.

As soon as Rabbi Haim entered, the governor pointed out that the pants he was wearing were longer than those normally worn at the time. In fact due to his great modesty, the Rav usually wore pants that reached his shoes, in order not to reveal any parts of his body.

Furious, the governor looked at the Rav's feet and criticized him: "Why are your pants so long? That's not what's done here! If I ever catch you wearing pants that reach your shoes again, I'll have you lashed!" Without reacting, the Rav left the governor's house in the most complete silence. Yet that very same night, the governor was awoken by extreme pains, so strong that he felt as if evil spirits were encircling and striking him without respite. Furthermore, he couldn't understand why none of his servants had come to his aide as a result of his cries.

In the morning, his servants gathered around his bed and tried, one after the other, to offer advice or suggest something that could alleviate his pain and suffering. Yet it was all in vain, for the evildoer groaned as his pain persisted.

News of the governor's mysterious illness spread like wildfire in the heart of the city, and numerous people volunteered suggestions on how to cure him, but without success. The governor's suffering increased on that first day, until he couldn't even sleep on the second night, which he spent crying out in pain. In the early morning, he summoned the greatest physician for help, but again without success.

In Mogador there lived a righteous Gentile, a friend of Israel, who knew Rabbi Haim Pinto and had also heard of how the governor had humiliated and threatened him.

Hence this man hurried to see the governor, who was suffering greatly and constantly moaning, and he said to him: "Know that everything which happened to you has a single cause: The humiliation that you inflicted on the great Rabbi Haim Pinto. He's a righteous and holy man, and you sinned by speaking to him like a worthless commoner. If you don't ask him for forgiveness, your pain will never leave you." These words had a great impact on the governor, who immediately acknowledged the connection between the two events and asked his friend to bring the Rav numerous meals, with great respect, and to ask for his forgiveness.

The man immediately went to the home of Rabbi Haim, where he was greeted by his wife, who asked him to wait until the Rav's return. As soon as he arrived, the man fell to his feet, begging him to forgive the governor for his offence and to end his suffering. However Rabbi Haim Pinto replied

that he had not yet received his full dose of pain: "Tonight he will suffer twice as much, and his healing will only arrive tomorrow," he added. The righteous Gentile pleaded with Rabbi Haim not to be strict with his friend the governor, and to allow for his complete healing. The Rav finally gave in to the supplications of his visitor and announced that he would completely forgive the governor.

The tzaddik proceeded into a corner of the room to pray for the governor. At the end of his prayer, Rabbi Haim sent back all the non-kosher food that had been brought to him, promising: "Tonight he will sleep peacefully." And that is precisely what happened. On that very same night, the governor slept peacefully, without realizing that his friend had spoken with the Rav. When he awoke, he understood Rabbi Haim's greatness, who had publically sanctified G-d's name by this incident.

The governor had learned his lesson, and from then on he stopped troubling the Jewish people. In fact he became a sincere friend of Israel.

In the Light of the Parsha

A Prayer Good for Numerous Generations

It is written, "Hashem said, 'Shall I conceal from Abraham what I do? ... I have known him, for he commands his children and his household after him'" (Bereshith 18:17-19).

It seems that G-d actually wanted to hide His intention of destroying Sodom from Abraham, but finally decided to tell him because "I have known him, for he commands his children." Why would He have wanted to hide His decision from Abraham? And how did the fact that Abraham "commands his children" lead G-d to modify His decision and tell him? What connection is there between the two?

Furthermore, when Abraham began to pray, why did G-d not immediately tell him that there were no tzaddikim in Sodom, and that it was useless to continue praying? In my view, the inhabitants of Sodom were so evil that Hashem did not want to give them any chance of being saved. In the generation of the flood, G-d wanted Noah to reprimand the people among whom he lived, for they may have repented and been saved. Not so for Sodom, to which He sent no tzaddik to reprimand them. It seems that the inhabitants of Sodom were more evil than those living in the generation of the flood, and they had to perish. Hence G-d did not want Abraham to pray for them, and in principle He did not wish to reveal His plans to destroy the city.

G-d finally told Abraham of His intentions, for He knew that Abraham "commands his children and his household after him." That is, since Abraham would teach G-d's ways to his children, there would always be tzaddikim among his descendants whose merit could save them.

G-d knew that the day would come when the prophet would say, "Hear the word of Hashem, O chiefs of Sodom; give ear to the teaching of our G-d, O people of Gomorrah" (Isaiah 1:10). This would occur because the Children of Israel would be like the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, worthy of destruction. Nevertheless, G-d would not want their destruction or close all means of escape. Hence He wanted Abraham to pray for Sodom by invoking the merit of would-be tzaddikim in order for such a prayer to help his own descendants when they behave like the inhabitants of Sodom. At that point, they would be aided by the merit of the tzaddikim living among them.

We can therefore understand why Hashem did not immediately reveal to Abraham that the city of Sodom did not shelter any tzaddik. He wanted Abraham to pray for the merit of a small number of tzaddikim to eventually save them. One day this prayer would prove useful for the Jewish people, among which there would be enough tzaddikim to save them from destruction.

Advice

It is written, “Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre” (Bereshith 18:1).

Rashi makes it clear that Mamre advised Abraham to undergo circumcision. However the commentators have questioned why Abraham, who was the first believer, asked for advice (etza) from Mamre concerning an order from Hashem.

The book Ta’amei HaMinhagim simply states that Abraham asked what blessing he should make upon circumcising himself. Was he to say, “Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us concerning circumcision,” or “Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to circumcise ourselves”? Mamre advised him to say “circumcision.”

In fact the blessing, “Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us concerning circumcision” is what Jewish law would later establish.

The book Brit Avraham brings another explanation: In the Mishnah (tractate Shabbat), it is stated that it is permissible to carry “a camel’s mouthful of bean stalks” on Shabbat. Mamre gave Abraham a small amount of bean stalks (etza) so he could make an ointment to place on the area of his circumcision to speed its healing.

Allusions

It is written, “Hurry! Take three measures of meal, fine flour!” (Bereshith 18:6).

The Chida discovered that the initials of the expression shaloch se’im kemach (“three measures of meal”) form the word sameach (“joyful”). That is, Abraham was happy to fulfill the will of his Creator.

The numerical value of the word kemach (“flour”) is the same as that of Pesach (“Passover”), meaning that it occurred during the time of Passover.

The expression rach va’tov (“tender and good”) has the same numerical value as the term be’hardal (“in mustard”). Our Sages explain that Abraham served them beef tongue in mustard.

Strict with Himself Only

It is written, “He took cream and milk, and the calf which he had prepared, and placed these before them” (Bereshith 18:8).

Numerous commentators have been surprised by the meal served by Abraham, namely “cream and milk, and the calf.” Could he have transgressed the prohibition against mixing meat and milk? We know that he was very careful to fulfill all Torah mitzvot.

Several complex responses have been offered by our Sages. However the Sedei Tevuot offers us a simple and correct one: Everyone is authorized to act over and above the strict requirements of the law, but only in regards to himself, not others.

Abraham was strict with himself, committed to not eating meat and milk together. On the other hand, with others he acted only according to the strict requirements of the law.

Ten Measures

It is written, “Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well on in years; the manner of women had ceased to be with Sarah” (Bereshith 18:11).

The Arizal teaches that the quantity of words spoken by every person is established in Heaven. When this quantity is reached, a person leaves the world. Our Sages have added that of the ten measures of speech that were sent down into this world, nine were allotted to women, leaving only one measure for others.

Our Matriarch Sarah was worthy of reaching an advanced age. From here we deduce that, contrary to other women, she did not speak much, but used her words very sparingly. She merited living a long time, as the verse states: “Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well on in years.” They both merited a long life. Yet to the question, “How did Sarah benefit from such merit, since nine measures of speech were allotted to women?” the verse responds: “the manner of women had ceased to be with Sarah.” That is, she did not speak as much as other women did, which is why she lived for so long.

Measure for Measure

It is written, “Hashem had caused sulfur and fire to rain upon Sodom and Gomorrah, from Hashem out of Heaven” (Bereshith 19:24).

Regarding the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, we may say that they will not arise [on the Day of Judgment]. This is proven from Scripture: “Sulfur and salt, a burning of the entire land; it cannot be sown and it cannot sprout, and no grass shall rise up on it – like the upheaval of Sodom and Gomorrah... which Hashem overthrew in His anger and in His wrath” [Devarim 29:22].

The words “which Hashem overthrew” refer to this world, the words “in His anger” refer to the World to Come, and the words, “and in His wrath” refer to the time when the Holy One will bring the dead to life....

Observe that just as the soil of their land was destroyed to all eternity, so were the inhabitants themselves destroyed to all eternity. Also observe how the Holy One renders out justice measure for measure: Just as they did not restore the soul of the poor with food or drink, likewise the Holy One will not restore their souls to them in the World to Come. And just as they withheld from the exercise of charity, which is called chaim [life], likewise the Holy One will withhold from them life in this world and in the World to Come. And just as they closed their roads and paths to their fellowmen, so has the Holy One closed to them the roads and paths of mercy in this world and in the World to Come.

– Zohar I:108a

Men of Faith

You Answered Me

The following story gives us something interesting to think about: An Islamic judge in a high-level government position once entered a synagogue and began to argue with Rabbi Haim on various issues. Rabbi Haim’s remarks and opinions did not please the judge, who had the tzaddik imprisoned. A few hours later, the judge suddenly fell dead and Rabbi Haim was released as a consequence.

To commemorate this miracle, the tzaddik composed a piyut that begins with the words, “He disturbed me and had me imprisoned in his jail, the enemy and hate-filled adversary. You answered me while I was in distress.”