

RABBI FRAND ON PARSHAS VAYEIRA

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vayera

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 655, The Bris Milah Seudah - Fleishigs or Milchig? Good Shabbos!

Analysis of Avraham's Hospitality: Honor Them and Yet Suspect Them

At the beginning of Parshas Vayeira, the Torah introduces us to the concept of Hachnasas Orchim [hospitality] by describing how anxious Avraham is to serve guests and how graciously he in fact serves them.

Avraham had 3 guests, total strangers, who he had never seen before in his life. He ran to the cattle, and as our Rabbis infer, he slaughtered 3 animals for 3 people - so that each guest would be able to have his own tongue (apparently a great delicacy). In truth the size of one tongue from a single head of cattle is far more than enough to feed three people! In fact, it is virtually impossible for one person to finish a whole tongue in a single sitting! Why then did Avraham do this? The answer is because this is how one makes a guest feel like he is the most important person in the world. One of the main facets of hospitality is to honor one's guest (not just to provide his bare necessities for food and shelter).

Avraham used tremendous quantities in virtually everything that he prepared for his guests. If the guests would have consumed even a significant fraction of the amount of bread provided, they would not have had any room left for the tongue.

There is one area, however, where Avraham does not go "overboard" in providing for the guests. Regarding water, he suggests "Let a little bit of water be taken" [Bereishis 18:4]. Why?

In fact, the Talmud [Bava Metzia 86b] infers that Avraham did not fetch the water himself, but dispatched others to do that. Again, why when it came to water did Avraham hold back - first in terms of not fetching it himself and second in terms of the quantity provided to the guests?

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin makes a simple calculation in Ozneyim L'Torah. There is a principle in

hospitality called "Honor him, but be suspicious of him" (kabdeihu, v'chasdeihu). For this reason, Avraham washed off the feet of his guests, lest they worship the dust of their feet. Avraham did not want to bring any idolatry into his tent. In other words, the water was not for drinking (kabdeihu) it was for bathing the feet of the guests, in fulfillment of the dictum that one must be suspicious of guests who are strangers (chasdeihu).

Regarding the "chasdeihu" aspect of hospitality, a good host wants to be as discreet as possible. You do not want to indicate that you are really suspicious of your guests; let it rather appear as though only your servants are concerned about the matter. Likewise, let the process of washing the feet be a short one, with a small amount of water in order to not humiliate or offend your guests. Avraham personally outdid himself in hospitality regarding the "kabdeihu" aspect; however "chasdeihu" was minimized and handled by agents.

Rashi quotes this idea that the feet were washed because Avraham suspected the guests were Arabs who worshiped the dust of their feet. Rav Moshe Shapiro wonders about this kind of idolatry. Where have we ever heard of an Avoda Zara that involves worshiping the dust of the feet? We might comprehend idols involving gold and silver or the sun and the moon, but what is this crazy business of worshipping the dust of one's feet?

Rav Moshe Shapiro answers that the malachim appeared as Bnai Yishmael, descendants of Yishmael. Yishmael considers himself special because he has been invested through his name with the Name of G-d "(k)EL". [YisraEL and YishmaEL are the only two nations on the face of the earth that have this distinction]. Yishmael feels that whatever he does has Divine sanction. Even when they commit ghastly acts of terror, it is in the name of their G-d. This stems from the fact that the Name of the Almighty is embedded in the name of the nation. When people think they are acting in the name of G-d and anything they do is "holy," this is a formula for disaster.

There is an expression "I worship the ground that he walks on." This accolade shows great admiration for the person about whom it is said. The problem with Yishmael is that they worship the ground that they walk on. They are so sure of themselves, so sure that what they are doing is right that they worship the dust of their own feet. In other words they worship the ground that they themselves walk on. This is why Yishmael is so dangerous!

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Vayeira are provided below:

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