

LESSON #1 IN HOSPITALITY: DON'T LET YOUR GUESTS FEEL INFERIOR

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vayera

Lesson #1 In Hospitality: Don't Let Your Guests Feel Inferior

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 787, Tefilah - Guaranteeing Success. Good Shabbos!

In this week's parsha, three strangers came upon Avraham in the heat of the day while he was recuperating from his circumcision. He runs to greet them. He gives them food and water and insists that they come into his tent where he can show them full hospitality. This incident is the paradigm of the mitzvah of "hosting guests" (hachnasas Orchim). We have spoken about this in prior years.

The Ramban writes that when Avraham addressed the strangers he used the word "Adonai," which is spelled with a kametz vowel under the letter nun. This is the same spelling as we find for the name of G-d, which indicates that Avraham recognized them as being Angels from on High. It is for this reason, the Ramban writes, that Avraham bowed down to them.

If Avraham recognized virtually from the outset that these were not mere Arabs walking in the desert heat, but rather Heavenly Angels, a powerful question arises. What was Avraham doing preparing such a sumptuous meal for them? Chazal say that Avraham slaughtered separate animals for each guest, so that they could each taste a delicious tongue. Why does he have Sarah bake such large quantities of bread for guests, who he apparently knew did not consume earthly food? Angels are spiritual beings. They eat neither tongue nor bread nor any of the other items Avraham troubled himself to prepare! Why the charade?

Rav Simcha Zissel Brody - the Rosh Yeshiva of the Chevron Yeshiva - in his Sefer Sam Derech cites the principle that "precious is man who was created in G-d's Image". He writes that based on this principle, it does not matter if one is dealing with real human beings or imaginary human beings, the laws of Derech Eretz [proper moral etiquette] of treating human beings kindly and generously requires one to treat the angels and feed them as though they were literal human beings who would enjoy all kind of earthly delicacies. By virtue of the fact that they looked like human beings who were

created in the Image of G-d, Avraham was required to treat them like human beings.

This is the lesson of this parsha. A human being, who is created in the image of G-d, is to be held in such high esteem that even someone who only has the appearance of a human being must also be treated the same way.

With this idea, we can come to appreciate an interesting observation made by Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev. The Torah describes Avraham's hospitality: "He took cream and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and placed these before them; he stood over them beneath the tree and they ate." [Bereishis 18:8]. The Berditchever comments: The first rule of how to treat guests is to make them feel comfortable and not make them feel as though they are inferior. Even though, in truth, the host may be much superior to them, he should never show that off. The guests should never be made to feel "This host of ours is in a different league than we are."

If you have a guest for Shabbos who is mainly preoccupied with trivialities in life, he is not a "Daf Yomi person" or anything near that, do not say to him, "Well, it is already 9 o'clock. I have to learn my Daf Yomi." It will make him feel inferior. If you are a "Tikun Chatzos Jew" (who recites special prayers at midnight mourning the destruction of the Temple) and your guest says at 9:30 pm "I am going up to bed now", do not tell him "Oh, I can't go to bed yet, I need to stay up another 2 and a half hours to recite Tikun Chatzos". If your guest asks you, "What time is minyan in the morning?" do not tell him "I never miss praying at sunrise," when you know your guest has never seen sunrise! This is rule #1 of hospitality - do not make your guest feel inferior.

Rav Levi Yitzchak explains that Avraham had a problem. He knew the guests were angels. One would think "There is no way to trump that! These guests of mine are angels!" That is not so. Just the opposite is true. Angels may be angels, but they have one major shortcoming. There is no spiritual growth with angels. They are created however they are and that is how they remain until they finish their mission. They do not grow. They do not improve. They are static creatures ("omdim").

Human beings are dynamic; they are constantly on the move. Man is a "holech". He may go up, he may go down, but he is not stationary. Avraham Avinu has invited guests, who are trapped in a state of "omed" while he is an unbelievable "holech", a spiritual dynamo who goes from test to test, passing each with flying colors. How will he be able to protect his guests from feeling inferior? Rav Levi Yitzchak gives a "Chassidic interpretation" to the pasuk "And he stood upon them under the tree while they ate." For that encounter, he made himself like one who was standing stationary, like an "omed," so as not to make his guests feel uncomfortable.

This is rule #1 of hospitality and rule #1 of doing favors. When you do a chessed [favor] for someone, do not rub it in his face! Do not make it seem to him like you are doing him the biggest favor in the world. You must do it in a nonchalant fashion, so that he does not even realize you are doing him a favor. If someone asks you for a ride and you are actually headed in the other direction, you dare not tell him how much out of the way it is and impress him with what a big favor you are doing him.

Rather, say, "That is unbelievable! I was headed just a block away from there myself!"

The Talmud teaches that one who says "This Sela is given to charity on the condition that my son lives" is a fully righteous person. [Bava Basra 10b]. He is giving Tzedakah for the most personal of motives, for the least altruistic of reasons. Rabbi Mordechai Bennet comments: I would understand if the Talmud said that such a person fulfills the mitzvah of Tzedakah. I would understand if the Talmud said that such a person did a nice thing. But how could the Talmud say that a person who gave charity for such "selfish reasons" was a "Tzadik gamur" [a completely righteous person]?

He interprets the case as follows: A person comes to a Jew and tells him his tale of woe. Alas, he needs money and he has this trouble and that trouble. The Jew says to him, "You are a G-d send. I also have a great misfortune in my family. I also need merit. I am therefore giving you this money so that my son should live. You are doing me the favor! I needed a meshullach!" This takes away the beggars discomfort and his feeling of inferiority. It removes the sense he has that he is a "nebach" and that the person he solicits is a great benefactor. Just the opposite! It is as if the person told him: "I am the 'nebach' and YOU are helping ME!" Such a person is a Tzadik Gamur. That is what the Gemara means.

We learn this from the master of Chessed - Avraham Avinu, who took individuals who did not need any of this, but treated them with great respect and dignity, because that is how one must treat a human being. He went so far as even to disguise his own growth so that they, as static beings, would not feel embarrassed in front of him.

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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