

# NEVER LEAVE THE STRANGER OUTSIDE\*

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At the beginning of the weekly parsha *Va'yeira* (Genesis, Chapter 18), there is a curious scene. Among the oak groves of Mamre, God appears to Abraham. It is one of those extremely hot days, like some summer days we've known in Baltimore and California's central valley. The kind of heat that rises in waves from the ground, the kind of heat that drives you indoors, that makes you want to sit still.

But instead of seeking shelter in the shade, Abraham sits in the entry to his tent, in the burning sun, looking out for weary wanderers. He is uncomfortable, but he isn't thinking about his own discomfort. In his direct communion with the Almighty, perhaps he shares with God the great loneliness the rabbis say that he feels.

After all, he has been sent here by God, away from his land, away from his father's house, away from his family, even away from his nephew Lot, who is camped near the city of Sodom.

Perhaps in his communion with God Abraham asks, will I always have to live alone?

And then something catches his eye. He looks up, and there on the roadway where a moment earlier was nothing, three men are standing.

Who are they? Where did they come from?

He doesn't know. But he hurries toward them from the entry of the tent and bows down to the ground. Please stay, he says. Let me bring water and food so you can wash and eat, he asks, as if they were doing *him* a favor.

Abraham rushes to prepare the food, which he brings back to them, and he stays with them while they eat.

There is something about this scene that may be a little curious. First the Torah says that God appears to Abraham. Then it says that when he sees the three men standing there, he leaves the presence of God and runs to greet the men. But why would someone run away from the presence of God to greet three strangers?

*Tanchum Yashan* relates that, Abraham knew that by hurrying to serve God's creatures, he was actually serving God—so his departure from God was not disrespectful. That is, practical good deeds take precedence over any abstract spiritual fulfillment. To receive wanderers hospitably, says the Talmud, is actually greater than to stand before the presence of God! (Shevuot 35b)

So Abraham did not linger for a moment in the toils of mystic communion with the Creator, but ran to attend to the practical tasks of making welcome some tired and weary wanderers who required food, shelter and rest. Moreover, as we're reminded by Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888), "Wife and child, the whole household he hustles into activity, has everything prepared afresh. . ."—which, of course, is a lesson to us. Warmly greeting newcomers doesn't satisfy the *mitzvah* (commandment). The tradition teaches us that Abraham becomes a *navi* (נביא), our first prophet, at this moment of *hachnasat orchim* (הכנסת אורחים), welcoming strangers as guests—not through an overactive imagination, ecstatic vision, or making predictions of the future, but in the *simcha shel mitzvah* (שמחה של מצוה), "the joy that comes from true God-serving deeds. . ."

Abraham's example is written into our law in the Book of Leviticus: "And if there is with you a stranger who came from a land abroad, you shall not torment him. As one born among you, so shall the stranger that has entered among you from abroad be to you, and you shall love his well-being as if it were your own, for strangers you were in the land of Egypt; I, God, am your Lord."

"You yourselves learnt to know," says Rabbi Hirsch, "all your trouble [wretchedness] in Egypt arose because you were strangers there and treated as such. . . . The consideration and love for strangers is the true test of your fear of God and your love of God."

And, says biblical commentator Nechama Leibowitz (1905-1997), Abraham's example of love for strangers has inspired his descendants down the ages who have always been distinguished for their hospitality, fulfilling the words of Job who said, "I never left the stranger outside."

We think that most modern Jews would agree with Abraham's example. But if that's true, why is it that we often don't emulate it in our congregational communities?

Someone once said to us: "It's hard for me to go up to new people." The fact is, neither of us is naturally outgoing. We both identify with the reluctance to approach new people. Most of our lives we have felt awkward when approaching new people in one situation or another, even when we knew it was the right thing to do.

What is there to fear in meeting new people?

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\* An earlier version was originally published in the *Chico Enterprise-Record* (January 23, 1999).

One of our biggest fears is the fear of rejection. We were probably afraid that we wouldn't know what to say. Or maybe we thought that what we would have to say wouldn't be witty or intelligent enough—and we would be rejected.

And what is the answer to such a fear? We can tell you that the answer is *not* in our own talk. In fact, our experience is that our own talk can often get in the way.

The answer is in having a question. When we can ask a question, which allows the other person to talk, two things happen. First the other person feels the warmth of our interest. And second, we are relieved, because we don't have to do all the talking.

What kind of question are we talking about?

The particulars of the question are not very important. What's important is that the question shows that you have an interest in the other person and that you want to get to know him or her. You can always ask about family or recreational interests or work—whatever.

The next step, for some of us, ourselves included, is sometimes very difficult—to be quiet and listen. In the course of listening, you think of more questions to ask, which help you to get to know the person.

Then, like Abraham, you can invite the person to something so that you can get better acquainted. Your home is the best, but if not that, then to some other gathering, at your synagogue or elsewhere.

The last thing we have to say should really have come first. Based on the example of Abraham, go to the person. *Do not* wait for them to come to you. They may *never come*.

So when you see a new person, or even an old one, introduce yourself, ask a question, and extend an invitation.

And if this is difficult for you, put yourself in the shoes of that person. Remember how you felt the last time you were not warmly welcomed. Then try doing what Abraham was doing when he saw the three strangers. He was praying. Pray for the strength to carry out the deed.

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