



Every Guest an Angel

Dena Weiss – weiss@hadar.org

Parashat VaYera 5779

The opening image of Parashat VaYera is a sweet and intimate scene of God's revealing Himself to Avraham, as he sits at the entrance of his tent on a sunny day. Yet, just one verse after God Himself appears to Avraham, He appears to lose a competition for Avraham's attention to a new and different set of guests:

בראשית יח:א-ג

וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה' בְּאַלְנֵי מַמְרֵא וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח הָאֵהָל כְּחֹם הַיּוֹם: וַיֵּשָׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים נֹצְבִים עָלָיו וַיֵּרָא וַיֵּרָץ לְקִרְאָתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֵהָל וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אֶרְצָה: וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי אִם נָא מְצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֵל נָא תַעֲבֹר מֵעַל עַבְדְּךָ:

Bereishit 18:1-3

God appeared to [Avraham] by the oaks of Mamre as he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. [Avraham] lifted his eyes and saw that behold, there were three men standing before him. When he saw them he ran to greet them from the entrance to the tent and bowed low to the ground. He said, "My master (*adonai*) if I have now found favor in your eyes, do not leave from before your servant."

At first glance, Avraham's behavior is alarming. How could he leave the entrance of the tent where God Himself had come to be with him, as verse two states explicitly, in order to greet other visitors?! How could Avraham be so disrespectful of his most distinguished Guest?

However, according to Rashi on the third verse of our story, it is not clear whom Avraham is addressing when it appears that he is turning his attention *from* God *to* other guests:

רש"י בראשית יח:א-ג

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי אִם נָא מְצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֵל נָא תַעֲבֹר מֵעַל עַבְדְּךָ: וְכִינִי אֶת הָאֲוֵרָחִים...
וְיֹאמֶר אֲדֹנָי אִם נָא מְצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֵל נָא תַעֲבֹר מֵעַל עַבְדְּךָ, וְלִגְדוֹל שְׁבָהֶם אָמַר, וְקִרְאָם כֹּלָם אֲדוֹנִים, וְלִגְדוֹל אָמַר אֵל נָא תַעֲבֹר, וְכִינִי אֶת הָאֲוֵרָחִים...
שֶׁלֹא יַעֲבֹר הוּא, יַעֲמְדוּ חֲבִירָיו עִמּוֹ, וּבִלְשׁוֹן זֶה הוּא חוֹל. דָּבָר אַחֵר, קִדְשׁ (שְׁבוּעוֹת לֵה:), וְהִיָּה אוֹמֵר לְהַקְבִּי לְהַמְתִּין לוֹ עַד שִׁירֹץ וַיִּכְנִס אֶת הָאֲוֵרָחִים...



Rashi to Bereishit 18:3

He said, “My master (*adonai*), if I have now found favor etc. [Avraham] is speaking to the greatest of [the visitors], and he called them all *adonim*, masters. And to the greatest he said, **do not leave**, and when he doesn’t leave, his companions will remain with him, and in this way, [the term *adonai* refers to something] ordinary. Another opinion (based on Shevuot 35b) is that [*Adonai* refers to something] holy, and [Avraham] is saying to the Holy Blessed One to wait for him while he runs to welcome the guests.

According to the first and perhaps more straightforward opinion suggested by Rashi, when it appears that Avraham is speaking to his new guests and ignoring God, that is exactly what is happening! Avraham does abandon God in favor of the newcomers. However, according to the second opinion Rashi provides, Avraham does not turn his attention to his guests without taking God’s presence into account. He first asks God’s forbearance in order to take a temporary leave and feed his visitors. When Avraham addresses a figure as *adonai*, it could refer to his first, divine Guest, or to his second, angelic¹ visitors, who have come in human guise.

The dispute that arises around whom the term *adonai* refers to shows us how unclear and ambiguous this word is. But it is possible that there is a very good reason for this lack of clarity on the part of the Torah. Perhaps it is deliberately ambiguous to teach us that the distinction that we make between honoring God, *Adonai*, and honoring one another, *adonai*, is not necessary, helpful, or accurate. As Avraham is taking care of his guests, he is showing honor to God. When Avraham is greeting his visitors, he is also speaking to God, simultaneously and without distinction. Avraham is confident in asking God to wait as he addresses the needs of his guests because of the reason for God’s apparition: God has come to show kindness to Avraham, visiting him because he was recuperating from his circumcision:

רש"י בראשית יח:א

וירא אליי. לבקר את החולה, אמר רבי חמא בר חנינא, יום שלישי למילתו היה, ובא הקב"ה ושאל בשלומי (בבא מציעא פו:)

Rashi to Bereishit 18:1

He appeared to him in order to visit the sick. R. Hama bar Hanina said: It was the third day after [Avraham’s] circumcision, and the Holy Blessed One came to ask how he was doing (Bava Metzia 86b).

¹ Although they are only referred to as men in Bereishit 18, the figures are referred to as angels, *malakhim*, in Bereishit 19:1.



Just as God wants to do the *mitzvah* of visiting the sick, he wants Avraham to do the *mitzvah* of welcoming guests. Taking care of the needs of others is not a disruption of God's visit; it is the fulfillment of it. We show kindness and appreciation to God when we show kindness and care for one another. The passage on Shevuot 35b, which is the basis for Rashi's interpretation that the *Adonai* Avraham speaks to is God, also teaches that "welcoming guests is even greater than receiving God's presence (*Shekhinah*), גדולה הכנסת אורחין יותר מהקבלת, פני שכינה." Or, we might argue, welcoming guests is identical to receiving God's presence:

תלמוד בבלי שבת יב:

תניא נמי הכי - הנכנס לבקר את החולה לא ישב לא על גבי מטה ולא על גבי כסא אלא מתעטף ויושב לפניו. מפני ששכינה למעלה מראשותיו של חולה שנאמר ה' יסעדנו על ערש דוי (תהילים מא:ד).

Talmud Bavli Shabbat 12b

It was also taught—One who enters to visit the sick should not sit on the bed or on a chair, rather he should wrap himself and sit [on the ground] before him because the *Shekhinah* is above the head of the sick person, as it says, **God will support him on his sickbed** (Tehilim 41:4).

While visiting him when he was sick, God was also sending Avraham the message about what His values are and the correct way to honor Him. If it were not beneath God's dignity to visit a human who was ill, then it would not be beneath God's dignity to wait as Avraham took care of another human's needs. The constant presence of the *Shekhinah* at the head of a sick person's bed shows that when visiting the sick and caring for their needs, we are visiting and honoring God simultaneously.² What might appear like an interruption from our ritual life is, in fact, no disruption at all.

Interrupting an interaction with God in order to encounter another human being is explored in Massekhet Berakhot. There, the Mishnah discusses when it is permitted or forbidden to pause and address someone else during one's recitation of the Shema or praying of the Amidah:

משנה ברכות ב:א

...בפרקים שואל מפני הכבוד ומשיב ובאמצע שואל מפני היראה ומשיב - דברי ר' מאיר. ר' יהודה אומר - באמצע שואל מפני היראה ומשיב מפני הכבוד ובפרקים שואל מפני הכבוד ומשיב שלום לכל אדם...

משנה ברכות ה:א

אפי' המלך שואל בשלמו לא ישיבנו...

² See also Talmud Bavli Nedarim 40a where R. Akiva instructs his students to sweep the floor of the home of their sick peer.

Mishnah Berakhot 2:1

...In between the paragraphs [of the Shema], he may greet [another person] out of respect, and in the middle [of a paragraph], he may greet [another person] out of fear—according to R. Meir. R. Yehudah says—In the middle [of a paragraph], he may greet [another person] out of fear and respond out of honor. In between the paragraphs, he may greet out of respect and respond to any person...

Mishnah Berakhot 5:1

[During the Amidah], even if the king greets him, he should not respond...

Although the laws of permitted and forbidden interruptions appear to be clear, they are also woefully insufficient. Never have I encountered a king or a similarly powerful person during my recitation of the Shema or praying of the Amidah. These laws do not cover the most frequent scenarios that I encounter, which are not of people presenting themselves to intimidate me, but rather of those who come to me for help. No guidance is given by the Mishnah for the questions of how to respond to the person who needs to be shown which page the congregation is on, or how to respond to anyone, child or adult, who presents in synagogue with needs not related to the prayer service. May I address their confusion or distress, or must I give God my undivided and uninterrupted attention?

Avraham's legendary kindness in welcoming his guests, his energetic and wholehearted *hakhnasat orḥim*, presents us with an answer to this question. The Mishnah does not raise these cases because they are obvious. Of course, the answer is yes. Help them. Help them and don't think of this as an interruption of your prayers. God is happy to wait. This is what prayer is for. It sensitizes you to your own needs and those of others. Praying should encourage you to address the needs of others following God's example and with His help. Prayer strengthens your connection with, and your relationship to, God, so that you know that God expects kindness from you. When you see your performance of *Hesed* as a continuation of your prayer, then God does not feel insulted or ignored, even though it looks like you have ceased communicating with Him.

This sensitivity to needless interruption does not only apply to prayer. Although not quite forbidden, it is considered important not to interrupt between the ritual washing of one's hands for bread and the recitation of the *ha-motzi* blessing at the beginning of the meal.³ However, any activity or speech which pertains directly to the meal itself is never considered an interruption:

³ Shulḥan Arukh Oraḥ Ḥayyim 166:1.



משנה ברורה על אורח חיים קס"ב:

ו"א שצריך ליזהר - אפילו בשהיה לחוד... וכ"ש שלא לדבר בינתיים אפילו שיחה מועטת ואפי' בד"ת חשיב הפסק לדידהו וצריך ליזהר לבד מהדברים שהם לצורך סעודה דמותר להפסיק לכו"ע:

Mishnah Berurah, Orah Hayyim 166:2

"There are those who say that he needs to be careful [not to interrupt]," even if it is just waiting and certainly even a little speaking. Even words of Torah are considered an interruption [according to this opinion], and he needs to be careful. With the exception of those things which are for the needs of the meal, for in that case, everyone agrees that he would be permitted to interrupt.

The Mishnah Berurah⁴ upholds the value of focus and a smooth transition from hand-washing to bread-breaking. However, some acts that might seem like interruptions are not considered to be problematic if they are germane to the meal. Words of Torah, which are usually valorized, are forbidden here. Just as visiting the sick is considered *greater* than meeting the *Shekhinah*, so too speaking words of Torah is demoted. *Hesed* is how we should be defining our lives and is always relevant, never considered to be a disruption even in cases where words of Torah are themselves forbidden!

This kind of holistic attitude is reflected in Rav Kook's⁵ interpretation of Bar Kapara's statement in Berakhot:

תלמוד בבלי ברכות סג.

דרש בר קפרא: איזוהי פרשה קטנה שכל גופי תורה תלויין בה? בכל דרכיך דעהו, והוא יישר ארחתיך (משלי ג:1).

Talmud Bavli Berakhot 63a

Bar Kapara expounded—What is the small passage which all of the fundamentals of Torah are dependent upon? **Know Him in all of your ways, and He will straighten your paths** (Mishlei 3:6).

Rav Kook understands this exposition of Bar Kapara as teaching us about approaching our lives in general as indistinct from the specifically ritual service of God:

הראי"ה קוק - מוסר אבין ב:ב

⁴ R. Yisrael Meir Kagan; Poland, 1838-1933.

⁵ R. Avraham Yitzhak ha-Kohen Kook; 1865-1935, Lithuania and Israel.



וכן בכל הדברים שעושה, הרי באמת אין דבר בעולם שאינו לכבודו ית', על-כן כל מה שעושה יהיה הכל דברי מצותו ורצונו, ויבקש בהם את שמו ית', כשישתדל בכל שכלו וכחותיו לעשות את מה שהוא עושה בתכלית השלמות בכל צדדי השלמות, ונמצא שהוא יודע את השם יתברך בכל הדרכים.

R. Avraham Yitzhak ha-Kohen Kook, Mussar Avikha 2:2

And similarly with everything that he does—in truth, there is nothing in this world which is not for God's honor. Therefore, everything he does could be God's word, command, and desire. So he should seek God's name in them. And when he strives with all of his intellect and all of his power to do what he does with the goal of wholeness in all aspects of wholeness, he will find that he knows God in all of the ways.

According to Rav Kook, not only acts that are clearly defined as *mitzvot* are eligible to be understood as part of the service of God. What defines the value of any act, from the most overtly religious to the most ostensibly secular, is our capacity to invoke God's name and to see ourselves as serving Him through our behavior. We are only interrupted in our service of God if we believe that such interruption is possible. But if we understand the world and its fullness as full of opportunities to realize God's glory and to encounter Him, we will worship Him without ceasing; every path will become a path to God and every guest will be an angel sent by Him.

Wishing you a Shabbat of kindness and wholeness.

