



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

ורא תשע"ט
Vayera 5779

God and Strangers

WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative from The Office of Rabbi Sacks for 5779. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the *Family Edition* is aimed at connecting older children and teenagers with his ideas and thoughts on the *parsha*. Each element of the *Family Edition* is progressively more advanced; *The Core Idea* is appropriate for all ages and the final element, *From The Thought of Rabbi Sacks*, is the most advanced section. Each section includes *Questions to Ponder*, aimed at encouraging discussion between family members in a way most appropriate to them. We have also included a section called *Around the Shabbat Table* with a few further questions on the *parsha* to think about. The final section is an *Educational Companion* which includes suggested talking points in response to the questions found throughout the *Family Edition*.

To receive the *Family Edition* together with the main *Covenant & Conversation* essay each week in your inbox, please join Rabbi Sacks' free mailing list at www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe.



PARSHAT VAYERA IN A NUTSHELL

God appears to Abraham. Three strangers pass by. Abraham offers them hospitality. One of them tells Abraham that Sarah will have a child. Sarah, overhearing, laughs in disbelief.

God then tells Abraham of His plan to punish the people of Sodom. Abraham enters into an unprecedented discussion with God about justice, demanding He take into account any possible innocent people in Sodom. God

agrees that if there are ten innocent men in the city He will spare it.

Two of the visitors, by now identified as angels, go to Abraham's nephew, Lot, in Sodom and rescue him, his wife and their daughters from the destruction. Eventually, the promised child, Isaac, is born to Sarah. The *parsha* ends with the great test of the *Akeidah*, the "binding of Isaac."



THE CORE IDEA

Our *parsha* begins with a somewhat confusing opening scene, with Abraham sitting at the entrance to his tent:

God appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men were standing over against him; and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent entrance, and bowed down to the earth... (Gen. 18:1-2)

At first glance the story seems simple. However, after a closer look it is actually complex and ambiguous. It consists of three sections:

- Verse 1: God appears to Abraham.
- Verses 2-16: Abraham meets the men/angels.
- Verses 17-33: The dialogue between God and Abraham about the fate of Sodom.

The relationship between these sections is far from clear. Is this one scene, two or three?

The most obvious possibility is three. Each of the sections is a separate event. First, God appears to Abraham, as Rashi explains, "to visit the sick" after Abraham's circumcision (*brit milah*). Then the visitors arrive with the news that Sarah will have a child. Then the great conversation between Abraham and God about justice and the punishment of the people of Sodom.

The Rambam suggests that there are only two scenes: The visit of the angels, and the dialogue with God. The first verse does not describe an event at all; it is, rather, a chapter heading. It tells us that the events that follow are all part of a prophetic communication from God, a divine-human encounter.

The third possibility is that we have a single continuous scene. God appears to Abraham, but before He can speak, Abraham sees the passers-by and asks God to wait while he serves them food. Only when they have departed – in verse 17 – does he turn to God, and the conversation begins.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Which of these three interpretations do you think best explains the story? Why do you prefer that interpretation to the others?
2. Consider the third interpretation. What do you think of Abraham's decision to interrupt his conversation with God? Was it justified? Can that behaviour ever be justified?
3. What do you think is the message behind the third interpretation?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Ari Fuld deserved his nickname the “Lion of Zion”. He was a brave and passionate Zionist and dedicated his life to the Jewish People and to the Jewish State. Ari served in the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) as a sergeant in an elite paratroopers' unit, and felt it was a privilege to serve in the IDF. When he turned 40, his discharge papers arrived but he tore them up and refused to retire. In his civilian life he continued his life's work to advocate for Israel in the media and on social media, and support IDF troops through the organisation he helped create and run called Standing Together.

Ari was killed one Sunday morning in a knife attack while doing his supermarket shopping in September 2018. After fatally stabbing Ari, the terrorist continued his attack, running toward a woman serving falafel in a nearby shop. With a superhuman effort, with his very last breaths, Ari jumped over a wall and chased the terrorist, shooting him before he could kill again. Ari then collapsed and died from

his wounds. He died as he lived. A hero dedicated to the Jewish people.

Ari's true heroism and character became well-known following his death as stories from his life began to surface. A particularly poignant one came from a local Arab who reached out to Ari's family to offer his condolences. He told them that every Friday when Ari would shop for his own family for Shabbat, he would also buy some extra food to give to his family who were poor and often hungry. While Ari dedicated his life to his own people, he had compassion and love for the stranger also.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What do you find most inspiring from this story?
2. Is it hard to show kindness to the stranger? Why is it important?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

In “The Core Idea” we saw three possible interpretations of the story of the angels visiting Abraham. These options hinge upon the way we translate the word *Adonai* in Abraham's appeal: “Please *Adonai*, if now I have found favour in your sight, do not pass by, I pray you, from your servant” (18:3). *Adonai* can be a reference to one of the names of God. But it can also be read as “my lords” or “sirs.” In the first case, Abraham would be addressing God. In the second, he would be speaking to the passers-by. In fact, an example of the second way to read the term *Adonai*, as “my lords” can be seen in the very next chapter (Gen. 19:1-2), when Lot receives two of the same angels in Sodom. The simplest reading of both stories would be to read the word consistently as “sirs” and many English

translations do just that. Jewish tradition, however, does not.

We know this because there are *halachic* implications in this case of how we read this word. If we read *Adonai* as “God,” it is a holy name, and both the writing of the word by a scribe, and the way we treat a parchment or document containing it, have special stringencies in Jewish law. And that is how Jewish law rules in this case.

This is an extraordinary fact, because it suggests that *Abraham actually interrupted God as He was about to speak, asking Him to wait while he attended to the visitors.* The story must now be read like this: God appeared to Abraham, and then he also noticed three men approaching. Abraham then turned to God and said “My

God, if I have found favour in Your eyes, do not leave Your servant [i.e. Please wait until I have given hospitality to these men].” Then Abraham turned back to the men and offered his hospitality.

This daring interpretation became the basis for a principle in Judaism: “*Greater is hospitality than receiving the Divine Presence*” (Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 127a). Faced with a choice between listening to God, and offering hospitality to strangers, Abraham chose the latter. God accepted his request and waited while Abraham brought the visitors food and drink, before engaging him in dialogue about the fate of Sodom.

How could Abraham put the needs of [who he thought to be] human beings before God? This passage is teaching us a profound truth. The idolaters of Abraham’s time worshipped the sun, the stars, and the forces of nature as gods. They worshipped power and the powerful. Abraham knew, however, that God is not in nature but *beyond*

nature. There is only one thing in the universe on which He has set His image: the human person, *every* person, powerful and powerless alike.

Abraham, father of monotheism, knew the paradoxical truth that to live the life of faith is to see the trace of God in the face of the stranger. It is easy to receive the Divine Presence when God appears as God. What is difficult is to sense the Divine Presence when it comes disguised as three anonymous passers-by. That was Abraham’s greatness. He knew that serving God and offering hospitality to strangers were not two things but one.

By choosing the most radical of the three possible interpretations of Genesis 18, the sages allowed us to hear one of the most fundamental principles of the life of faith: We honour God by honouring His image, humankind.



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

Tzedakah is the gift of money or its equivalent. But sometimes that is not what we most need. We can suffer emotional as well as physical poverty. We can be depressed, lonely, close to despair. We may need company or comfort, encouragement or support. These too are human needs, no less real for being untranslatable into the language of politics or economics.

That is what *chessed* is about: emotional support, loving-kindness, love as compassion. It is what we mean when we speak of God in Psalm 147 as one who ‘heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds’. It includes hospitality to the lonely, visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, raising the spirits of the depressed, helping people through crises in their lives, and making those at the margins feel part of the community. It is *tzedakah*’s other side.

Tzedakah is done with material goods, *chessed* with psychological ones: time and care. *Tzedakah* is practical support, *chessed* is emotional support. *Tzedakah* is a gift of resources, *chessed* a gift of the person. Even those who lack the means to give *tzedakah* can still give *chessed*. *Tzedakah* rights wrongs; *chessed* humanises fate.

Abraham and Sarah were chosen because of their *chessed* to others. Ruth became the ancestress of Israel’s kings because of her *chessed* to Naomi. At the heart of the Judaic vision is the dream of a society based on *chessed*: society with a human face, not one dominated by the competition for wealth or power. *Chessed* is the mark of a people joined by covenant. Covenant creates society as extended family; it means seeing strangers as if they were our long-lost brothers or sisters. A community based on *chessed* is a place of grace, where everyone feels honoured and everyone is at home.

Ten Paths to God, Unit 6 – Chessed: Love as Compassion

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What is the difference between *tzedakah* and *chessed*?
2. Abraham was known as a man of *chessed*. How do you think this impacts on his descendants?



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

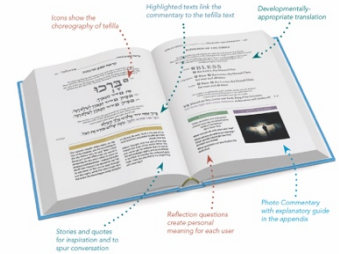
1. If the third interpretation of this story is correct, do you think Abraham was justified in speaking to God in this way?
2. Do you think the main focus of Judaism is our relationship with God or with our fellow man?
3. According to Rabbi Sacks, there is a central philosophical message contained in this story, a polemic against the other religions of the time, and perhaps also of our time. What is it?

4. “We honour God by honouring His image, humankind.” How can we do this? How can you do this in your life?
5. “To live the life of faith is to see the trace of God in the face of the stranger”. How different from you does the stranger need to be? Do you think there a difference between doing *chessed* for a fellow Jew or a non-Jew?



QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? This siddur has been designed to help young people explore their relationship to their God, and the values, history and religion of their people. Email CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org with your name, age, city and your best question or observation about the *parsha* from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger**. Each month we will select two of the best entries, and the individuals will each be sent a siddur inscribed by Rabbi Sacks! Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

THE CORE IDEA

1. This is an open question, with no correct or incorrect answer. All three approaches are legitimate, despite Rabbi Sacks presenting the third one as the position of Jewish tradition (as proven by the *halachic* status of the term *Adonai*). The educational message of the third approach is a very strong one, and the basis of this week’s *Covenant & Conversation*. But as Rabbi Sacks admits, the first approach is perhaps the easiest one to read into the text, and this could equally be argued for Rambam’s approach also.
2. While it is understandable to consider Abraham’s behaviour towards God as disrespectful, and even sacrilegious, the profound message here is that showing *chessed* to humanity is more important even than our relationship with God. To some extent this represents two different approaches within Judaism – one focuses more on our relationship with God (known as *Mitzvot ben Adam leMakom*) and the other on our relationship with our fellow man (known as *Mitzvot ben Adam Lechavero*). A balance between both approaches is also possible.
3. The message of the third interpretation is further explored in the “Thinking More Deeply” section. It suggests that the primary focus of Judaism is concerned with humanity, even if it is at the expense of our relationship with God. Having said that, a close reading of Rabbi Sacks’ message is that when one honours our fellow man by treating him/her with respect and dignity, we are in fact also honouring God. Perhaps this is the balance between the two approaches, whereby our focus is both humanity and God.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. This is an open question with no correct or incorrect answers. There are many inspiring parts to the story, including Ari’s passion for the Jewish people and Israel, and the way he placed these as ultimate values in his life. But the way in which he died is also deeply inspiring and heroic. Perhaps the most inspiring part is the stories that are only coming to light after Ari’s death – the acts of kindness that he performed out of the spotlight without anyone knowing about them.
2. A powerful aspect to the *chessed* Ari showed to this Arab family is that not only are they not Jewish, but they are a Palestinian Arab family. Ari fought for the Jewish people’s right to live in its historic homeland. He ultimately lost his life to a terrorist who believed the Jewish people do not have such a right. However, Ari saw the humanity in the stranger in his midst and showed *chessed* to this family. It is often harder to show kindness and *chessed* to those that are not like us, but this is when *chessed* is most important, and Ari understood that.

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. *Tzedakah* is monetary or practical support, while *chessed* is about emotional support, loving-kindness, and compassion.
2. Abraham’s central quality was *chessed* and he was chosen to be the progenitor of the Jewish people. He can be considered a primary role model for the Jewish people, and perhaps just as his defining quality was *chessed* so the core value of Judaism, and the defining quality of the Jewish people is and should be *chessed*.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Abraham is a model for us in how we can approach our relationship with God. But he modelled conflicting messages and values. On the one hand, he argued with God about the moral justification for destroying the cities of Sodom, and on the other hand he accepted the task of sacrificing his son Isaac without questioning the command at all. The third interpretation has Abraham asking God to be patient while he attends to the needs of the three visitors. It seems that Jewish tradition feels that this was a legitimate way to behave towards God, because it bestows the *halachic* holiness of the name of God to the word *Adonai* in this story.
2. Judaism has a dual focus – our relationship with God and on *Mitzvot ben Adam leMakom*; and our relationship with our fellow man, and on *Mitzvot ben Adam Lechavero*. A balance between both approaches is also possible. While perhaps maintaining an equal focus on both is the ideal, the message of this story seems to be that we can compromise on our honouring and respecting God, in order to bring respect and honour to the stranger. Having said that, Rabbi Sacks' message is that when one honours our fellow man by treating him/her with respect and dignity, we are in fact also honouring God.
3. This question is asking for the people around your Shabbat table to consider real and practical ways that they can show honour and respect to the people in their lives, including those that are strangers to them. Examples of this could be the way they treat the members of their family, their friends, teachers, the bus driver and shop keeper that they interact with on a daily basis, as well as the stranger they have never met before and will probably not meet again. Abraham models this last example, showing kindness and respect to people that were not like him, and he had no expectations of meeting again. This is the ultimate example of *chesed*.
4. It is always easy to show kindness and love to those that are like us. That is the most natural thing in the world. Hence, we have immediate and unconditional love for those in our family and find it most easy to love those from our community and people. The greater moral challenge is showing equal kindness and love to those that are not like us – those that look different from us, or believe in different things to us, and have a different lifestyle to us. That is what we should strive for if we are to replicate Avraham's character trait of *chesed*.
5. The more different a stranger is from you, the harder human nature makes it to see them as a friend or even fellow human (in the brotherhood of mankind). Strangers are people that physically look different to you, speak differently to you, live life culturally different to you, and believe different things about life to you. The challenge is to see God in all these people no matter how different they are from you, and that is what Rabbi Sacks says is the definition of living a life of faith: believing that no matter how different we all are from each other, we are all created in the image of the Divine. This is what he terms in many different places as "the Dignity of Difference." Although we have the concept in Jewish law that *tzedakah* begins at home, this is a pragmatic approach to the justice that is at the core of the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah*. *Chessed*, however, must be universal. And perhaps it can be argued that *chesed* in a context vastly different from your own, is a deeper and more profound act of kindness. It is easy to be kind to those that are the same as us. This is human nature and the clannish nature of humankind. Judaism asks us to transcend that, to see God in all of mankind, and to act on this through *chesed*.