

Parsha Ponders

Vayeira | November 13, 2019 | 16 Marcheshvan 5780

*Stationary teachers, elevated students*¹

ויאמר אדני'י א-נא מצאתי חן בעיניך אל-נא תעבר מעל עבדך

[Avraham] said: "My Lord², if I have found grace in your eyes, please³ do not pass from upon Your servant"⁴

Avraham was amid a prophetic vision of Hashem, when he noticed three potential guests in the distance. Having a burning desire to host them for a meal, he asked a favor of Hashem. He respectfully asked Hashem to wait for him to return after hosting these guests. While this was definitely the proper mode of conduct, from Avraham's request of "please do not pass from upon Your servant", it sounds like he was concerned. He was worried Hashem wouldn't wait for him. What was the concern? Hashem was the one who initiated this prophetic vision. In fact, Hashem knew that Avraham was simply fulfilling the idiom that "greater is greeting guests than greeting the Divine Presence"^{5 6}. Why then did Avraham think Hashem wouldn't continue the prophetic vision upon his return?

A simple explanation is that Avraham was worried he would experience that which happened with him and his nephew Lot. His nephew was of poor character, and as such Avraham didn't receive any prophecy while they were together⁷. Once they separated, Hashem resumed speaking to him. Avraham was concerned that such an occurrence would happen again. These guests appeared to be Arab nomads⁸, who were probably idol worshipers. Consequently, Avraham was concerned that the Divine Presence would leave him⁹. He therefore asked Hashem to please remain, even though he was about to associate with idol worshipers.

Perhaps there's a deeper explanation, building on the above idea. *Chazal* extort us¹⁰ to specifically seek a Rabbi who resembles an Angel to teach us. In what way should they resemble an Angel? One way to look at it is that a Rabbi's main goal should be to elevate his student. This should be so much a priority that it would even come at the expense of the Rabbi's own personal growth. Mankind are called "movers", whereas Angels are called "stationary"¹¹. A Rabbi whose personal growth is stationary, such that his student alone is elevated, this is an Angelic Rabbi who should be studied under. A Rabbi who focuses on his own personal growth will fail to properly elevate their student.

¹ Based on Panim Yafos to Genesis 19:1-3

² This word is subject to debate if it's referring to the most prominent of his guests, or to G-d (Shevuos 35b; Bereishis Rabbah 48:10). The following presentation assumes the latter

³ Cf. Targum Onkelos ad. loc., who as usual translates נא as "now"

⁴ Genesis loc. cit. v. 3

⁵ Shevuos loc. cit. More on this below

⁶ Hashem even concurred with what Avraham did. We see this from Rashi to ibid 18:22 (quoting Bereishis Rabbah 49:7). From the fact that Hashem so to speak waited for Avraham to return shows that He was fine with it

⁷ Rashi to Genesis 13:14, quoting Midrash Tanchuma Vayeitzei § 10

⁸ Rashi to ibid v. 4

⁹ I'm not sure I understand this explanation, as this isn't the first time Avraham had guests. Since he was the only monotheist in the world (Pesikta Rabbasi Chapter 33), every guest he would have would be idol worshipers. Was he then always worried the Divine Presence would leave him? Or was this because this was the first time he was amid a prophecy when the guests showed up...?

¹⁰ Moed Kattan 17a, based on Malachi 2:7

¹¹ Zechariah 3:7

It says in Psalms that someone righteous will blossom like a date tree and will elevate like a cedar tree¹². These are referring to do different types of teachers. A blossoming date tree produces fruit¹³, unlike a cedar tree. However, a date tree never reaches the heights of a cedar tree. Someone who teaches others will merit to see many students who flourish and are considered their fruit. Because of the teacher's focus on others, they seemingly won't be able to grow high like a cedar tree. Nevertheless, the verse is teaching us that one will lead to the other. A person learns the most from their students¹⁴, more than from their own self education. A Rabbi that starts off like a date tree, will end up with fruit, and will eventually become as high as a cedar tree¹⁵.

If a Rabbi's intention is to avoid focusing on personal growth, there's a risk of danger. They have to be very vigilant that the student doesn't lower their stature. The teacher has to work hard to remain stationary, unaffected by any negative traits of their student¹⁶. This was what Avraham was thinking when he saw his three guests. He desired to convert them to monotheism, and was concerned that they'd negatively influence him. He had to be diligent to remain stationary. In fact, he was in the middle of a prophetic vision. To merit such a visit from Hashem, Avraham had to maintain a highly elevated state. He definitely had to be cautious against spiritual descent by associating with these idol worshipers. But due to his intense desire to spread monotheism, he was willing to take the risk. As a precaution, he requested of Hashem that He not depart from him.

Chazal learn from this episode¹⁷ that greeting guests is greater than receiving the Divine Presence. We can now understand this to mean that although Avraham could have elevated himself through his encounter with the Divine, he preferred to greet guests instead. He wanted to be a positive influence on them and raise their spiritual stature, by converting them to monotheism. All that we have said is alluded to in one of the ensuing verses¹⁸, which says that Avraham was עומד עליהם, standing upon his guests. Usually this is understood to mean that he was waiting on them hand and foot, taking care of all their needs. But as we have seen, standing or being stationary is a trait of the Angels. Avraham was being a proper teacher, remaining stationary in his spirituality, and focusing on his students.

Good Shabbos

¹² Psalms 92:13, with Metzudas Dovid

¹³ See Bava Basra 80b

¹⁴ Ta'anis 7a

¹⁵ The Panim Yafos says this is also the intent behind Isaiah 42:21: יקוק חפץ למען צדקו, which refers to refraining from self-improvement, יגדיל תורה, which refers to elevating students, and ויאדיר, thus elevating oneself

¹⁶ The Panim Yafos suggests this is the intent behind R' Yossi's statement מעולם לא אמרתי דבר וחזרתי לאחורי (Shabbos 118b)

¹⁷ Shevuos loc. cit.

¹⁸ Genesis loc. cit. v. 8