

Welcoming the Stranger

Parashat Vayera: [Genesis 18:1-22:24](#)

Haftarah: [II Kings 4:1-37](#)

Rabbi Hal Greenwald
Assistant Director
Holy Land Democracy Project

At the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, I was blessed with the opportunity to learn Torah from Dr. Walter Herzberg. Learning from Dr. Herzberg was a rigorous delight. He taught with the methodology of his teacher, Dr. Nechama Leibowitz z"l. The methodology demanded effort from the student but the reward was great, and Dr. Hertzberg's respect and affection for his own teacher was an inspiring model for us.

His teaching on the opening three verses of this week's Parasha has been so impactful on me as a person and a teacher that it is hard to choose just one from among its many streams of inspiration. But the overall effect of the teaching, for me, was a certain liberation in how I view the text.

**And the Lord appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre
As he was sitting in the entrance to the tent
In the heat of the day**

In "giving over" these *pasukim* in Dr. Hertzberg's way to Jewish 8th graders, synagogue adult learners or Catholic High School teachers, the Instructions I give are always the same. Each *chevrutah* comes up with 10 questions about this *pasuk* and the next. ANY question is the key. They scribble their questions to the side of *pasukim*, written on a shared board.

<i>How did He appear?</i>	<i>Who's 'he'?</i>	<i>Where's that, WHY there??</i>
And the Lord appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre		
<i>Why are you sitting at the ENTRANCE when it's so hot?</i>		
As he was sitting in the entrance to the tent		
<i>Why sitting?</i>		
In the heat of the day		

One of the gifts of this approach to learning is how it completely frees the student of any limitations whatsoever in questioning the text. Skeptics and critics, this is your moment. The student is encouraged to put aside all she knows about the context of the *pasukim*, any historical understandings she might have and any previously known commentaries she might be carrying in the back of her mind. This is not usually the first step in looking at a text from a Jewish perspective, but here it's invaluable. Equally important, one is detached - for the moment -- from any need to reconcile. Rashi, Ibn Ezra and Rambam

offer enormously significant *perushim* on the verses, but here we want to lead first with a blank and intuitive mind.

These *pasukim* are especially rich territory to mine because there's a real kinetic energy present, and learners never have a problem coming up with ten questions. Only one piece of information is introduced after the initial *pasuk*, and it's key – the "he" is Abraham, and he's just circumcised himself in the preceding parasha.

**And he looked up, and he saw three men standing *Alahav* over against him.
And he saw them and he ran to greet them
From the entrance of the tent
And he bowed to the ground.**

And he said to them, "*Adonai*, if it pleases you, pass not from before your servant. Let a little water be fetched"

With this information now assimilated (and giggled over; 8th grade boys, Jewish or Catholic, make much of Abraham's age at the time of his Brit Milah;) the students repeat the same question exercise for the second and third *pasukim*. After writing their questions down, they are given further instructions: in groups of 5, they must act out the action in the parasha to this point in skit form.

Attempting to replicate the action of the scene reveals some real logistical problems, and this is an instance in which the Hebrew of the text (*as if it's not always*) is especially vital. For the Hebrew seems to indicate the possibility that the three men are standing *alahv* – *on top* of Abraham. The choreography which follows – "*And he saw them and he ran to greet them from the entrance of the tent and he bowed towards the ground*" – leads to some very interesting dramatic presentations, due to the seeming inherent physical impossibilities.

More Questions and Difficulties: Does not the word *Adonai* indicate that Abraham is speaking to ***Adon Sheli*** – My (1) L/lord? If there are *three* strangers standing at some impossible physical relationship to him, why would he address them in the singular?

And yet a few more questions:

- Wasn't Abraham speaking to God at the beginning of the parasha? If so, he seems to have *turned his back* on him (put him on call waiting?) and turned his attention instead to three mere passers-by. Not the form we might expect of the Patriarch – who puts the Creator of the Universe on hold?
- How is Abraham even *sitting upright*, much less running toward anything, in the wake of his self-circumcision?

I remember a student in my rabbinical class suggesting, cheekily, that Abraham was hallucinating and that none of this had actually happened. He went on to postulate that

the entire Torah could be seen, possibly, as one long, extended dream. How else to explain so much of what we find in it?

In his response to this idea, Dr. Hertzberg again taught us something important.

“Who knows?” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “Could be!”

He told us that these *pasukim* should go to show us the enormous potential of Torah, its infinite complexity and invulnerability to redundancy. “Turn it, turn it...” Without driving the point into the ground, he had shown us with his casual response to the theory of Torah-as-Hallucination that we cannot harm the sacredness of Torah with our questions or interpretations, whatever they may be, because the Torah is bigger than that. It welcomes all skeptics and wraps them in a journey of infinite discovery.

His casual shrug when presented a radical, even objectionable idea showed his deep confidence in the transcendence, of Torah, of this world. It’s why we keep reading it, year after year – it’s no ordinary text.

His own *vort* on the seemingly limitless meaning of the text was moving – pun intended. He said that Abraham seems essentially **discombobulated** – and that God’s purpose in relating the verses in this was precisely to have us experience the same dislocation and confusion. Abraham has an encounter with God, then sees three strangers – who turn out to be angels -- then runs to engage them in a physically impossible manner. We are meant, he said, to experience viscerally the very same post-circumcision-sans-pain-killer disorientation as Abraham.

Abraham is not really sure, the teaching goes, if he’s talking to God or men. We can never really be sure if we’re meeting God or mere humans in the byways of our lives.

The goal of the *pasukim* is not to provide pat answers, but the opposite -- to provoke anxiety and uncertainty. If Abraham (we) is not sure if he’s engaging with God or “mere” human beings – then he (we) must *always* greet a stranger in our midst as if he’s (we are) greeting God.

In the opening verses of VaYera, we find limitless possibilities and the fundamental Jewish contribution to human relating: We are each created in God’s image. Let it finally guide our actions, always.