



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

14- 15 November, 2008

17 Cheshvan 5769

Parashat Vayera
(Genesis 18:1–22:24)

Rabbi Stan Zamek
Song Leader Shani Ben Or

From the Rabbi's desk

The opening of parashat Vayera, our Torah portion this week, is a very slippery text. In the first verse we are told "The LORD appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot." But instead of "seeing" God, Abraham sees and greets three men:

"Looking up, he saw three men standing near him As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground, he said, "My lords, if it please you, do not go on past your servant. Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree. And let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves; then go on -- seeing that you have come your servant's way.."

So what happened to God? "The Lord appeared" but mere "men" are standing before Abraham-- how is this possible?

This abrupt shift of focus is not a continuity problem, but purposeful ambiguity. The human and divine realms are blurred all through the story, not out of narrative sloppiness, but to make a point. Are these men, angels, or God? The Torah's answer is -- yes. The Torah describes reality as a blending of the human and the Divine. Our text holds out the possibility of intimacy with the Infinite. In this world, God's words are as understandable as a conversation over lunch. God's presence is as close to our experience as welcoming a guest into our home. Of course, God is not present to us exactly as we are present to one another, but HaShem is as accessible. God's holiness is not an alien thing, but a more powerful instance of intimacies that we have already experienced many times in our lives.

The Rabbis teach us that to welcome a guest is greater than greeting the *Shechina*, the Divine Presence. In a sense, to greet another human being with warmth is to also welcome HaShem. It is, after all, the fact that each person is made *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the Divine image, that entitles him or her to our care and concern. There is little difference between making a guest feel welcome and at ease and acknowledging the Creator of the Universe. Perhaps there is no difference at all.

Nahum Sarna notes in his commentary to this parasha that unlike previous times in the Torah when "the Lord appeared," this manifestation of God to Abraham is not followed by an act of worship. "In actual fact," Sarna says, "hospitality to strangers itself becomes an act of worship."

Hospitality is an act of worship. Now there is a deep teaching. When Abraham offers his guests food, drink, and rest, he is worshiping. We too can pray in this way: with a handshake, with an offered cup of coffee, with a smile, or with a word of welcome. These small acts of kindness are only small in the effort required. In the potential for holiness, they are very great. It is the genius of our tradition that it places the Master of the Universe within reach of a hand extended in friendship.

All Blessings
Rabbi Z

13th November, 2008