

Vayeira | Can you ever put G-d on hold?

This is a special Shabbat as Jews gather in more than 1 400 cities and 98 countries around the world in a spirit of unity to welcome in this year's Shabbat Project. Usually it takes place on the Torah portion of Lech Lecha, but this year because of the way the calendar came out it is all happening on the Shabbat we read the portion of Vayera. This is so fitting because the parsha recounts in meticulous detail our founding father Avraham's warmth, hospitality and kindness to others.

The Torah sets the scene. Avraham at the ripe age of 99 is recovering from his recent brit mila (circumcision). He's in extraordinary pain, it's a searingly hot day in the desert, yet there he is, sitting at the opening of his tent waiting restlessly for guests.

Our sages teach us that Avraham's tent was always open on all four sides so that anyone needing rest and comfort and shelter could enter. And in fact, the midrash says that on the that day G-d specifically ensured it was an intensely hot day to prevent people from venturing out so that Avraham would be spared the trouble of looking after them. And yet despite the heat, despite the lingering pain of his circumcision, despite his old age, Avraham remained undeterred. As the day wore on, and Avraham became increasingly distressed at having no opportunity to do kindness, G-d relented and sent him three angels, masquerading as weary travellers ? whom, with the help of his wife, he proceeded to lavish with choice delicacies and painstaking care and attention.

The Torah can span decades and even centuries in a single sentence, but in describing Abraham's archetypal act of kindness, it devotes a number of lengthy verses. Water is fetched, and the travellers are invited to wash their feet and find a shady spot to lie down and rest. Bread is brought as a starter course. Cakes are baked, veal is prepared, beverages are served. Avraham himself is at the centre of all of these activities, and there's a sense of urgency as he seeks to ensure his guests are made to feel welcome and looked after in every respect.

There is one detail which is especially striking. The parsha begins with the Shechinah, G-d's Divine Presence, appearing to Avraham and being with him while he recovers from his brit milah. When the travellers appear on the scene, Abraham says, ?My Master if I find favour in your eyes please do not move on from your servant.? (Genesis 18:3). The most obvious reading here is that he is addressing one of the travellers. But according to one extraordinary explanation in Rashi, these words were actually addressed to G-d, Himself. In effect, Avraham was asking G-d to hold on for him, so to speak, while he attended to the needs of the travellers. Based on this, the Sages of the Talmud (Shabbat 127a) make a radical statement: ?Greater is hachanasat orchim [welcoming guests] than receiving the Divine Presence.?

How do we understand these words, which are so surprising and seemingly counter-intuitive. The Maharal understands this statement with reference to the Mishna in Pirkei Avot, ?Beloved is the human being created in G-d's image.? (Avot 3:18). The Maharal explains the mishna to mean that every human being has within them a Divine soul, a reflection of G-d, Himself, and that this makes human beings the greatest tangible manifestation of G-d's presence on earth. And so even though the Shechina came to be with him in the wake of his circumcision, Abraham knew he would in fact have a more meaningful interaction with G-d through engaging with the Tzelem Elokim ? the Divine image in another human being.

This idea is so central to the Shabbat Project. For the past five years, in thousands of Jewish communities around the world, we've witnessed people coming together in unprecedented ways; we've seen Jews from different backgrounds connect at Challah Bakes and Havdallah Concerts and around Shabbat tables like never before. We've seen the possibility of transcending all the barriers and differences that seem to separate us ? barriers of language and culture, differences in ideological outlook and levels of religious observance. We've seen walls torn down, families rejuvenated, deep feelings awakened, deep friendships formed.

In essence, through the power of Shabbat, and in a spirit of unity and goodwill and celebration, we've located the the Tzelem Elokim in one another. We've put all of our differences aside and ? like Avraham ? related to one another on a soul level, as beings created in the image of G-d.

Avraham's example is a rallying call to all of us to continue inviting people in ? to make a space for others in our hearts, in our lives, and in our homes. As the Mishna in Pirkei Avot says, ?Let your home be wide open.? (Avot 1:5), which we learn from Avraham whose home was open on all sides. This year, as we gear up for the Shabbat Project once again, let's invite friends and family, but also colleagues and neighbours and even casual acquaintances to take a seat at our tables. Cities like San Diego, St Louis, Santiago, Raanana, Telz Stone, and many others where there has been a specific focus on home hospitality, are taking their cues from Avraham.

But there's another dimension here. We need to make our homes open and welcoming not just to other people, but to Shabbat itself. Our sages compare Shabbos to a bride. In the magnificent, Lecha Dodi, we sing ?Lecha Dodi Likrat Kallah? ? ?Come my friends to greet the Bride.? That's why Shabbos begins with the special service which we call Kabbalat Shabbat, which means the ?welcoming in of Shabbat?. We actively welcome Shabbos into our lives and ensure our home is a place in which the Shabbos bride can feel comfortable and welcomed ? so that we, in turn, can share in her warmth and energy and inspiration.

On this Shabbat in particular, it is so inspiring to think of all the countless Jewish households around the world that will be preparing for Shabbos ? making sure the food is ready, and the house is clean and tidy, and everyone is in the right mindset and spiritual state to receive the energy and the inspiration of the Shabbos bride. That is also what hachnasat orchim, welcoming guests is about. We welcome people into our homes, but we also welcome Shabbat. We make our homes Shabbos homes.

That is the vision of The Shabbat Project, but it's also something we can take joy and inspiration and comfort from every Shabbos of the year ? welcoming the Shabbos bride, and welcoming others into our lives, with open homes, open hearts and open arms.

Just like our father, Avraham.