

Vayera: Hospitality - Avraham and Lot

- From: RABBI LIPMAN PODOLSKY [podolsky@hakotel.edu] The Bet Halevi teaches an innkeeper an important lesson in hachnassat orchim. A Sich'a from Rabbi Podolsky of Yeshivat Hakotel.

VAYERA: HOSPITALITY; AVRAHAM AND LOT

Two of a Kind

Rabbinic garb tended to make the Bais HaLevi (HaRav Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveitchik, the first in the Brisker Torah-dynasty) a bit uneasy. Thus, when on the road, he often removed his "uniform" and donned plain clothes, so he could travel incognito.

Once, in the deep freeze of a Lithuanian winter, he had to travel from Brisk to Baranovitch by horse and wagon. The cold was unbearable. When he realized that they would not reach their destination before nightfall, he asked his wagon-driver to stop at a lonely Jewish inn on the side of the road.

They knocked on the door, but no one answered. The Bais HaLevi ordered his driver to knock as hard as he could, for they were literally freezing! Finally, the innkeeper, irate for having been roused out of bed, begrudgingly opened the door a crack, attempting to prevent the icy wind from penetrating.

"What do you want?" he barked.

"Please let us in, give us a room," they begged, "We're freezing!"

He arrogantly snapped that he had no space for them because all of his rooms were already reserved for "important guests." They pleaded, they implored, but the innkeeper wouldn't budge. He even tried to slam the door shut in their faces, but the big, burly wagon-driver prevented him from doing so. The Bais HaLevi beseeched him once more to have pity on his fellow Jews; they would even sleep on the floor! After all, to lock them outside in such adverse conditions was tantamount to a death sentence!

Finally, at long last, he let them in. But, make no mistake, he did not give them a comfortable bed in a heated room. Rather, he reluctantly granted them a narrow strip of hallway in which to sleep, on the hard, cold floor (no mattress), so as not to inconvenience his "distinguished" guests. In addition, in return for this luxury he demanded the exorbitant sum of one ruble each. They didn't quibble, though; they were glad to be inside, protected from the life-threatening cold. The driver lay down, while the Bais HaLevi lit a small candle from which to learn Torah. Before he could open his sefer (book), the innkeeper's harsh voice rang loud, "Put out that light at once! How dare you disturb our sleep!"

The Bais HaLevi extinguished the candle and continued to learn by heart, silently.

A short while later, a large band of chassidim arrived headed by their illustrious Rebbe, Reb Aharon of Koidenov. These were the "important guests" the innkeeper had been waiting for. The host and his wife dressed their faces with smiles as they opened the door graciously for their honored company. Hastily, they lit lanterns and kindled a warm fire, sparing no effort to treat their guests in accordance with their stature. The chassidim sat on comfortable couches as the innkeeper selflessly doled out hot cups of tea to thaw them out after their frigid journey.

After they had warmed themselves, Reb Aharon arose to prepare himself for Maariv. As he passed through the hallway to wash his hands, he noticed two Jews lying on the floor. One of them seemed a bit familiar. After scrutinizing his face in the darkness, Reb Aharon realized that

there before him, on the floor, lay the venerable Rav of Brisk. He instinctively cried out, "Reb Yoshe Ber, the Brisker Rav! What are you doing lying here on the floor?!"

The chassidim, followed by the innkeeper, hurried to see what had excited their Rebbe. The shock, disbelief, and indignation felt by all were palpable. Slowly, the chassidim turned their accusing gaze upon the now-minuscule innkeeper, a man guilty of unprecedented irreverence. The innkeeper was mortified. How could he have acted so callously toward one of the leading sages of the generation? Reb Aharon directed the innkeeper to beg the Bais HaLevi's forgiveness.

The innkeeper meekly squeaked, "I am very sorry for how I acted. I didn't realize that you were the Brisker Rav."

The Bais HaLevi bluntly responded, "I don't forgive you."

The innkeeper was stunned.

Reb Aharon ordered the innkeeper to beg forgiveness once again, and yet again he was rebuffed. In the end, the Bais HaLevi acquiesced. He said, "Of course I will forgive you, but please, first allow me to relate to you the following Dvar Torah.

"In Parshas Vayera we learn of two individuals, each of whom seemingly excelled in the mitzvah of Hachnasas Orchim (hospitality). Ninety-nine year old Avraham, on the third and most painful day following his circumcision, schlepped himself out of bed and went outside, in the extreme heat, in a desperate search for wayfarers with whom he could perform loving-kindness. When Hashem sent him the three angels, Avraham, thinking they were humans, went out of his way to treat them royally. He ran enthusiastically from place to place, arranging for them a lavish feast. He mobilized his entire household to feed and take care of these three strangers. And while they were dining, he graciously stood over them, catering to their every whim. Understandably, the Torah praises Avraham to no end.

"Later in the parsha, we find Avraham's nephew, Lot, ostensibly displaying the very same characteristics. When he encountered the angels, he pressed them to come to his home to be his guests. He would not take no for an answer. He knew he was risking his life, but the paramount mitzvah of Hachnasas Orchim would not be neglected. When they arrived, he prepared a feast comparable to that of Avraham. Later, when the wicked citizens of Sodom demanded that Lot hand his guests over to them, Lot went out alone to defend them, closing the door behind him. He even offered to sacrifice his own daughters to guarantee the safety of his cherished guests. And finally, Lot nearly lost his own life as the depraved mob began to riot.

"Such self-sacrifice for the sake of Chessed must have earned for Lot untold reward. He most certainly must have accrued ample merits in Hashem's eyes. Yet, when Lot was rescued from the inferno of Sodom, we find that Lot was saved only because of Avraham's merits, and not his own (Rashi 19:17). How can this be? What happened to his own reward? Indeed, what differentiated the Hachnasas Orchim of Avraham from that of Lot?"

Answered the Bais HaLevi: "When the angels appeared to Avraham, they appeared in the guise of wandering Arabs (Rashi 18:4). Avraham assumed them to be complete strangers, of no special significance. Nevertheless, Avraham sacrificed of himself for their sake, with alacrity and devotion. He spared nothing to provide his anonymous guests with the ultimate in luxury and pleasure.

"Lot, however, realized from the very first moment that his guests were none other than Heavenly angels (Breishis 19:1). It is no special feat to perform Chessed with angels. Even the fact that Lot risked his life dwindles to insignificance, for with angels, he could safely rely on their Divine protection. This is the difference between the Chessed of Avraham, and that of Lot.

"It is no excuse to say that you did not realize that I was the Brisker Rav. It makes no difference who I was, you should have welcomed me honorably, as one should to any fellow Jew. So I will forgive you on the following condition. I want you to come to Brisk to be my guest for two weeks."

The innkeeper thought this condition a little strange, but what could he say? He agreed, and obtained the Bais HaLevi's forgiveness.

Shortly thereafter, the innkeeper made his way to Brisk to fulfill his condition. With his own eyes he witnessed how the Bais HaLevi welcomed and fed the poor of Brisk, how he mercifully alleviated the suffering of the sick and impoverished. He beheld how the Rav himself literally resuscitated those near despair. He saw, and became transformed into a new man. After he returned home, the innkeeper embarked on a new career of Chessed and loving-kindness.

Eventually he became famous as the most hospitable host in his region.

It's relatively easy to do Chessed with famous personalities. When the spotlights of social recognition shine upon us, we find ourselves invigorated with the Yetzer Tov of loving-kindness.

But how do we react when we know that our Chessed will remain unrevealed? How do we treat the members of our family, in the privacy of our home?

A big person is measured by his numerous small acts; a small person by his few big ones.

(Submitted by Nisson Shulman. This is a sicha from Yeshivat Hakotel. Their website is <http://www.hakotel.edu>. Their archives are at: <http://www.hakotel.edu/torah/rp.html>.)