

Vayera: Jewish Values

- Chief Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks.

Avraham and Sarah, hospitality, Angels standing over them before the hospitality, but afterwards, they were standing above the angels. When we welcome strangers we are higher than angels.

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A scene engraved in the Jewish imagination: the aged Abraham, sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day, looks up and sees three passers-by. He rushes to greet them and urges them to eat, drink and rest. "Let a little water be brought," he says, but then he and Sarah - despite the heat and their age - engage in a flurry of activity, Sarah baking bread, Abraham preparing a calf, offering their guests a lavish meal.

This is no mere story. It is a Biblical video of Jewish values in action. To be a Jew is to welcome strangers. The Sages went further. Immediately before the men pass by, the Torah tells us that "G-d appeared to Abraham," yet it is not until the visitors leave that G-d speaks. From this the Rabbis inferred that Abraham asked G-d to wait until he had seen to the needs of his guests. They drew the majestic conclusion: "Hospitality is even greater than welcoming the Divine presence."

How can anything be greater than welcoming the Divine presence? Perhaps the meaning is this: in Tenakh angels often appear in the guise of human beings. The word "angel" - malakh - does not always mean what it does in the mystic visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel: an ethereal being next to the heavenly Throne of Glory. Often it means "a messenger," someone whose appearance is part of the Divine script.

By treating their visitors as if they were angels, Abraham and Sarah were in fact welcoming the Divine presence - not as did Isaiah and Ezekiel in a vision, but by responding to the image of G-d in the face of a stranger. To see G-d in heaven is one of the heights of religious experience, but to see the trace of G-d in human beings is even higher. It is what made Abraham and Sarah the grandparents of an utterly new kind of faith.

In the Synagogue where I first served as a Rabbi, there was a couple that sat near the back of the Shul and the ladies' gallery. They were quiet people. They sought no honors or recognition. But whenever a stranger appeared, they would welcome them, make them feel at home, and invite them to a meal. Through this simple and lovely act, they brought many people "under the wings of the Divine presence." I used to think of them as our Abraham and Sarah. It was a privilege to know them.

When the strangers first appeared to Abraham the Torah says that they were nitzavim alav, literally "standing above him." After all, they were angels; he was only a human being. But when he serves them food, the Torah says hu omed aleihem, "he stood above them" - for when we

welcome strangers we are lifted even higher than angels.

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