

A Morsel of Bread

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We have just come through a season of words. Speeches, slogans, promises on billboards and in kitchens. This week the words start meeting the ledger, as coalition talks turn campaign lines into budgets and portfolios. It is a good week to read how Avraham spoke to three strangers.

The heat of the day

Vayeira opens with Avraham sitting at the entrance of his tent "in the heat of the day" (Bereishis 18:1). Rashi, from the Gemara in Bava Metzia 86b, tells us why the L-rd appeared to him just then: it was the third day after his circumcision, and G-d came to visit the sick. Rashi adds that G-d brought the sun out of its sheath so that no travelers would trouble Avraham while he healed. When He saw that Avraham was pained that no guests were coming, He sent angels to him in the form of men.

Avraham was in pain, it was the hottest hour, and he had the most honored visitor a man can have. His sorrow was that nobody was passing by.

Then he looked up and saw three men. "He ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them" (18:2).

What he said, and what he did

Listen to the offer. "Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree. And let me fetch a morsel of bread" (18:4-5). In Hebrew, **וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלָיו**. A little water, a morsel of bread, a rest in the shade. Small words.

Now watch the hands. Avraham hurries into the tent to Sarah: three seahs of choice flour, knead it, make cakes (18:6). He runs to the herd himself and takes a calf, "tender and choice" (18:7). He brings curds and milk and the calf, sets them before his guests, and stands over them under the tree while they eat (18:8).

He promised a morsel and served a feast.

The Gemara noticed. In Bava Metzia 87a, Rabbi Elazar sets the two verses side by side, "I will fetch a morsel of bread" and "Avraham ran to the herd and fetched a calf tender and good," and draws the rule: "The righteous say little and do much, whereas the wicked say much and do not do even a little."

The other half of that teaching comes from next week's parsha. Ephron the Hittite tells Avraham, about the field and cave of Machpelah, "A piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between me and you?" (23:15). Generous words. Then Avraham weighs out four hundred shekels, and the Gemara reads the verse as Ephron taking the best coin (23:16). Big talk, full price.

Shammai gave every Jew the same rule: **אָמַר מְעַט וַעֲשֵׂה הַרְבֵּה**, "speak little, but do much; and receive all men with a pleasant countenance" (Avos 1:15). Shammai, known for his strictness, put the pleasant face in the same sentence. Avraham, sore and sitting in the heat, ran to strangers with one.

Greater than the Divine Presence

There is a harder detail. When Avraham saw the travelers he was in the middle of a visit from G-d Himself. The Gemara in Shabbos 127a brings Rav Yehuda in the name of Rav: "Hospitality toward guests is greater than receiving the Divine Presence." It reads Avraham's words in 18:3, "My L-rd, if I have found favor in Your eyes, please do not pass away from Your servant," as addressed to G-d: wait for me, I have guests.

We would not dare say that on our own. Avraham could, because the One he asked to wait is the One who sent the guests. Serving them was a way of staying with Him.

Walking them out

The meal is not the end of the story. When the men rose to go toward Sedom, "Avraham walked with them to see them off" (18:16).

The Rambam codifies it in Hilchos Avel 14:2: "The reward one receives for accompanying guests is greater than all of the others. This is a statute which Abraham our Patriarch instituted and the path of kindness which he would follow. He would feed wayfarers, provide them with drink, and accompany them." He adds that hospitality surpasses receiving the Divine Presence, that escorting is greater than hosting, and that the Sages said, "Whoever does not accompany them is considered as if he shed blood."

Feeding a guest takes care of his body. Walking him out tells him he mattered, that he is not being dropped at the door now that he has what he came for. Some parting words, a few steps together, and he goes on his way less alone.

After the season of words

What does this ask of us in the week after an election?

First, a way to listen. Every campaign is full of morsels of bread, promises that sound modest and reasonable. The coalition table is where we will see whether a morsel was a calf or an Ephron's field. Our part is to remember what was promised, measure it against what is delivered, and hold everyone, starting with the people we voted for, to the same scale. That is the measure the Gemara gave us, and it is fair to everyone.

Second, a way to speak. Most of us also said a great deal over the past months, at Shabbos tables, in family groups, online. Some of it we would gladly take back. Shammai's rule is not only for politicians. Say less now. Do more. If you promised a neighbor a hand, or promised yourself an hour of learning once the campaign was over, that is the calf to run for this week.

Third, a way to part. A hard campaign leaves people on opposite sides of a street they share. Avraham walked strangers out toward Sedom, a city he would soon plead for. We can walk a few steps with the neighbor who voted the other way, and offer some kind words and a pleasant face. The Rambam calls failing to escort a kind of bloodshed. Turning our backs on each other once the voting is over does the same kind of damage, slowly.

The tent door

Rashi says Avraham sat at the entrance of his tent "to see whether anyone passed by, and invite him into the house." He did not wait for guests to knock. He watched the road, in pain, in the heat.

That is the Avraham we carry into Shabbos. He offered little and gave much, he left the Divine Presence waiting so strangers could eat, and he walked them out. In a week of counting and bargaining, may we be people whose words are smaller than our deeds, and may the One who came to visit the sick give strength to everyone who serves this country, and wisdom to those now sitting down to build its next government.

Good Shabbos.

All glory to the Ribono shel Olam · Errors are mine

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