

# Avraham's Yom Tov

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## Avraham: Hero of Shavuot?

Logically, Moshe should be the hero of Shavuot; as the leader who addressed God, as the prophet whose hands realized miracles, as the individual who ascended Har Sinai and accepted the blueprint of the universe on our behalf, Moshe ought to be celebrated as the mortal most responsible for our receipt of the Torah.

And yet, a midrash describing the scene atop Har Sinai places the credit not with Moshe, but with Avraham:

*At that moment the ministering angels sought to harm Moshe. God shaped Moshe's face to appear like that of Avraham, and God said to the angels, "Are you not embarrassed before him? Is this not the one to whom you descended and in whose home you ate?" God then turned to Moshe and said, "The Torah was given to you only in the merit of Avraham."*

**Midrash, Shmot Rabbah 28**

באותה שעה בקשו מלאכי השרת לפגוע  
במשה עשה בו הקב"ה קלסטירין של  
פניו של משה דומה לאברהם, אמר להם  
הקב"ה אי אתם מתביישין הימנו לא זהו  
שירדתם אצלו ואכלתם בתוך ביתו,  
אמר הקב"ה למשה לא נתנה לך תורה  
אלא בזכות אברהם  
מדרש שמות רבה כה

The storyline of this midrash is perplexing on several levels:

- We are taught (Talmud Bava Metzia 86b) that the malachim did not actually eat in Avraham's home; rather, they merely pretended to do so. If that is true, then they owed Avraham no debt.
- We are further taught (ibid) that the malachim who visited Avraham were Michael, Raphael and Gavriel. The malachim who protested were a set of anonymous "מלאכי השרת, ministering angels." Are we to assume that the general angels should have felt gratitude for Avraham's service of their three compatriots?
- What connection is there between offering food to the angels, and forcing them to forego their right to the Torah?

But most of all: What is unique about the merit of Avraham's hospitality?

## Avraham's Unique Contribution

As God personally declared in the Torah, Avraham was worthy of Divine affection because of his commitment to benevolent chesed, as well as his determination to educate his descendants to benevolence:

*For I have loved him, because he will instruct his children and his household after him, and they will guard the path of God to perform acts of righteousness and justice.*<sup>21</sup>

**Bereishit 18:19**

כי ידעתיו למען אשר יצוה את בניו ואת ביתו אחריו ושמרו דרך ה' לעשות צדקה ומשפט

**בראשית יח:יט**

The arrival of these traits on the human scene was the moment for which God had been waiting since the formation of Adam and Chavah.

Adam and Chavah were charged with working in their garden and protecting it, and they would have been the sole beneficiaries of their work; every plant they grew, nearly every fruit they cultivated, was theirs to eat.<sup>22</sup> Only in one case were they told to labor benevolently without expectation of reward: The fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil would receive their care, but provide no benefit. All work for that tree would be purely *chesed shel emet*, kindness without any anticipation of reciprocity. This was their own opportunity to engage in *עולם חסד יבנה*, bringing into reality a world founded on kindness. Instead, though, the first human beings took that fruit for themselves.

The generations leading up the Flood were far worse in their abdication of *chesed*; as the Torah describes, they engaged in kidnapping and theft until God decided to roll back Creation and begin anew. Only Noah was saved, and his generosity aboard the Ark earned the survival of humanity.

One might have expected Noah to be honored with Divine favor as Avraham was, but Noah lacked Avraham's second trait; he did not expect to convey this generosity to the next generation. We will see that Avraham educated his children in benevolence; no such example exists for Noah. Indeed, the sages noted that Noah waited far longer than his ancestors did before producing children, and they explained that Noah intentionally refrained from procreating because he expected that his children would imitate the sins of the people around them:

*Therefore he delayed procreation, because of the guilt he perceived in his generation, until God revealed to him the matter of the Ark. At that point he married a woman and produced children.*<sup>23</sup>

**Midrash, Bamidbar Rabbah 14:12**

ולכך איחר לפריה ורביה מפני עון דורו שהיה רואה עד שגילה לו הקב"ה ענין התיבה ובאותה שעה נשא אשה והעמיד בנים

**מדרש במדבר רבה יד:יב**

Avraham, however, charted a new path. In contrast to Adam and Chavah who took personal benefit from their generosity, in contrast to the Flood Generation who only demanded and did

<sup>21</sup> There is some debate as to the proper translation of *צדקה* in this sentence, but whether it is read as philanthropy or righteousness, it is understood to be a reference to social conduct rather than internal spiritual development.

<sup>22</sup> Bereishit 2

<sup>23</sup> A comparison to Amram and Yocheved's decision to refrain from producing children (Talmud, Sotah 12a) and to King Chizkiyah's decision to refrain from producing children (Talmud, Berachot 10a), and to the sages' view of those decisions, might be fruitful.

not give, and in contrast to Noach who anticipated his descendants' moral failure, Avraham demanded the opportunity to produce children<sup>24</sup> and teach them his unique ways.

This vision earned Divine affection, and, ultimately, the selection of Avraham's descendants to receive the Torah. A midrash<sup>25</sup> informs us that HaShem waited for 26 generations to present the Torah to humanity, because humanity needed to learn ארץ ארץ, the proper functioning of society. Avraham initiated that process of training the nation which would ultimately stand at Har Sinai and receive the Torah.

## Avraham and the Malachim

Nowhere, perhaps, was Avraham's commitment to train the next generation in benevolence on greater display than in his offer of hospitality for his three visitors:

*"[And Avraham ran to the cattle, and he took a tender and good calf] And he gave it to the youth" – This was Yishmael; he gave it to Yishmael in order to energize him in mitzvot.*

**Midrash, Bereishit Rabbah 48:13**

ויתן אל הנער זה ישמעאל  
בשביל לזרזו במצות.  
מדרש בראשית רבה מז:יג

While in the middle of an audience with God, Avraham turned away and ran to greet three strangers and offer them assistance – and he made certain to ask his son, Yishmael, to participate, the better to train him in “the path of God, to perform acts of righteousness and justice.”

In aiding the visitors, Avraham superseded the angelic guardians of the Torah - despite the fact that, as we noted above, he addressed only three representatives, who did not consume any actual food. The point was not the actual meal, but the supersession it demonstrated.

Malachim do not give of themselves to others, and they do not reproduce and educate their young; these traits displayed Avraham's trademark transcendence. So it is that the story of Avraham's hospitality opened with the strangers “נצבים עליו,” standing over Avraham, but it concluded with Avraham “עומד עליהם,” standing over them, in a superior position.

This may also be why the merit of Avraham, rather than Moshe, is invoked as the cause for our receipt of the Torah: Without Avraham's commitment to practice social generosity and to transmit that trait to his descendants, humanity could not have received the Torah at all.<sup>26</sup>

Certainly, Avraham's commitment provides urgent instruction for us: To be a nation worthy of receiving the Torah, we must first demonstrate kindness, and teach our children to do the same.

## Megilat Ruth

We read Megilat Ruth on the day we celebrate receiving the Torah, and among the classic explanations for this association is the text's emphasis on the chesed which fills the Torah.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Bereishit 15, for example

<sup>25</sup> Midrash, Vayikra Rabbah 9:3

<sup>26</sup> Note, as well, Bava Batra 109b regarding the fate of Moshe's descendants

<sup>27</sup> Birkei Yosef Orach Chaim 494:11

Naomi informed Ruth and Orpah that she was empathically embittered by the suffering they experienced, and she would prefer they fare better elsewhere rather than suffer for her.<sup>28</sup> Ruth took care of Naomi without hope for recompense. Boaz generously provided for Ruth without knowing of their family connection, and then married her without concern for the potential effect on his estate. Ploni Almoni's real name is erased from the scroll precisely because of his selfish concern for what marrying Ruth might do to the ultimate division of his wealth.<sup>29</sup>

But beyond benevolence, the story of Ruth follows Avraham's model of passing the lessons of selfless chesed to one's children. Elimelech failed in this regard, and the price was his own life as well as the lives of his sons. Ruth, in contrast, practiced chesed, and bequeathed it to her descendants. She did so to such an extent that Ruth's great-grandson's wife, Batsheva, used her as an example for her son Shlomo haMelech, composing the classic Eishet Chayil in tribute to her strength and generosity.<sup>30</sup>

On Shavuot, we accept Torat Chesed, a Torah filled with mitzvot which provide a moral baseline as well as a set of ethical aspirations for our role in society. May we merit to follow the model of Avraham and of Ruth, practicing chesed and teaching it to our children, and in doing so prove ourselves to be worthy descendants.

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<sup>28</sup> Vilna Gaon to Ruth 1:13

<sup>29</sup> Rashi to Ruth 4:1

<sup>30</sup> Daat Mikra to Mishlei 31, among others