

Dear Chavraya,

How strange and bold and beautiful it would be to sit on the front steps of one's home and call out to passersby to come and sit for a while, to share a meal and conversation. Alas, in our world it would probably also be seen as bizarre and dangerous behavior, and impossibly impractical. Who has such time to wait on strangers or to suspend the pace of one's day to so respond to human warmth?

Yet, this is exactly what Abraham and Sarah do, the first Jews, the ones in whose footsteps we follow. They keep the flaps of their tent open on all sides, announcing to wayfarers from every direction that they are welcome. Their larder is full, insuring that the hungry will be fed. From the very first, to be a Jew has not been about doing just what is practical or easy. Had it been, our journey would never have begun. We can imagine Abraham and Sarah, immigrants in a new land now, knowing what it means to be weary, having complained to God when they were told to leave all that was familiar, "hey, we have a good life here, we're comfortable, how about if we start the Jewish people right here?" To be a Jew is to follow God's ways in the world with passion and compassion.

So this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayera*, begins: *Vayera eylav Hashem.../And God appeared to Abraham as he was sitting before the door of his tent in the heat of the day.* In these simple words there is profound practical and theological meaning. We learn what it is to follow God's ways, not far off and complicated. Through rabbinic teaching we feel the warmth of a Jewish view to the human-God relationship, its reciprocal responsibility teaching us ultimately of the reciprocal responsibility that is meant to define human relationships. God has come to pay Abraham a visit, as it were, following the latter's circumcision. In their interaction we learn two *mitzvot*. From God, we learn the importance of *bikkur cholim / visiting the sick*. From Abraham, we learn of *hachnasat orchim/welcoming guests*. In an earthy *midrashic* telling of the rabbis, Abraham attempts to rise in spite of his pain and God says, "you sit and I will stand." Here, the rabbis say, we learn what it means to cleave to God. It means to cleave to God's attributes, such as to visit the sick.

If we would repair the world to be what it is meant to be, it begins with our own acts of kindness. There is no separation between, if you will, the personal and the political. Identified with the attribute of kindness, Abraham's effort to reach out to the stranger is the source of the rabbinic teaching that the "welcoming of guests is greater than receiving the presence of the *Sh'chinah*." Drawing from the words of Psalm 89, *Olam chesed yibaneh/the world is built by kindness*, the Slonimer Rebbe teaches that *the tachlis/essence of the creation of the world is the attribute of love*.

Though I am fascinated by the thought, our own acts of loving outreach into the world are probably not going to find us sitting on our front steps awaiting passersby. The way of Abraham and Sarah is a model of loving relationship with all people, the passersby in day-to-day life. It begins among our selves, in family and community, seeking the wellbeing of each other and offering welcome. In "random acts of kindness," in which true beauty lies, our deeds flow out into the world, her foundation to restore.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Victor