

Passion for Compassion: Thoughts for Parashat Vayera

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By

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ANGEL FOR SHABBAT FOR PARASHAT VAYERA, by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The opening paragraph of the Amidah, recited as the central prayer of our daily liturgy, refers to the “God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob.” And yet, when the blessing is actually recited at the end of this passage, it praises God as “the Shield of Abraham.” Only Abraham’s name is mentioned. Why?

One explanation is that Abraham is identified in rabbinic tradition with the quality of Hesed, compassion. While both Isaac and Jacob had other important qualities associated with them, Abraham is the special exemplar of kindness. By singling out Abraham in the first blessing of the Amidah, our sages were thereby underscoring the unique importance of Hesed.

This week’s Parasha begins with the story of Abraham’s remarkable hospitality to three strangers (who later turned out to be angels!). Abraham not only instructs the members of his household to prepare a meal for the guests, but he himself rushes around to see that things are done properly. Abraham demonstrated that Hesed is manifested in good intentions and more especially in actual deeds of kindness.

Rabbi Hayyim Yosef David Azulai (1724-1806) referred to the quality of Hesed as a vital principle of halakhic decision-making. Proper halakhic rulings take into consideration the human predicament, how halakhic rulings will impact on people’s lives. Halakha is not a cold, hard system of inflexible laws, but is a meaningful framework for happy and constructive living.

Hesed entails empathy for others. It eschews judgmental and extreme positions.

From time to time I receive comments from Institute members about new “humrot” (stringencies) which are being introduced at their synagogues. In one case, the congregation engaged a new rabbi who promptly raised the mehitzta, forbade women’s hakafot on Simhat Torah, and took a “black hat” approach to

other issues. A group of congregants became so fed up that they quit the synagogue and started their own modern Orthodox congregation.

In another case, a new rabbi discarded long-established congregational practices with the claim that he wished to “raise halakhic standards.” Although this has caused grief among congregants, people think that there’s nothing they can do to alter the situation. After all, the rabbi is trying to make them “more religious.”

In yet other cases, rabbis have chosen to avoid getting involved in conversions, telling candidates that they should go to the RCA. These rabbis do not wish to take responsibility in this important area, preferring to pass the buck to the RCA...and its many “humrot” in matters of conversion. The resultant frustrations and alienations are painful beyond words.

One disgruntled person told me: “Our rabbi is introducing stringencies and he is too frum.”

I replied to this person: A rabbi who introduces stringencies does not thereby gain the title of being “frum.” On the contrary, being “frum” is most aptly demonstrated when the rabbi makes halakhic decisions that demonstrate sensitivity to the needs of the community. To declare something forbidden is far easier than to declare something permissible. A really frum rabbi (or lay person) is most often characterized by a spirit of compassion, intellectual openness, and a desire to expand, rather than contract, legitimate religious observance. A frum person demonstrates respect for established customs and practices and seeks to support rather than undermine them. While it may happen that halakhic considerations will lead to added stringencies, changes should be made only with the utmost care, when there is no valid halakhic alternative, and with due consultation with those who will be affected.

What is severely missing in much of modern-day Orthodox Judaism is Abraham’s example of Hesed. A prevailing view seems to equate strictness and exclusionary attitudes with true religiosity. If people dress the dress and shuckle the shuckle, they are deemed to be “frum;” otherwise, they are thought to be somehow deficient in their religiosity.

Rabbi Rafael Aharon ben Shimon, a great rabbinic figure of the early 20th century, wrote: “Our fathers and rabbis have taught us a great principle: to hide one’s deeds if they are in the category of excessive piety. One may act as he pleases in the privacy of his own home, and may take on stringencies and pious niceties. But when he is among friends, he should blend in with them....”

External shows of excessive piety may often be the result of egotism, or abject conformity to the “frum” crowd. A truly pious person serves the Lord as humbly and inconspicuously as possible. The quality of Hesed motivates a pious person to want to associate lovingly with others, not to stand out and separate himself/herself from the community.

When we recite the Amidah, we need to focus a bit more on the first blessing that singles out Abraham as a religious exemplar. The quality of Hesed is at the core of piety and righteousness.

[Angel for Shabbat](#)