



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BEREISHIT > Vayeira

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Vayeira

**Do You Love God More than
You Love People?**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

If God came to visit you – offering you a once in a lifetime opportunity – what would you do if you saw a few strangers wandering about?

One of the most troubling stereotypes about religion – and one that is unfortunately very often true – is that God-fearing people are more sensitive to their own beliefs than to other people. Seeing themselves as on “God’s side” and fighting a “holy” war, they barely consider the existence of the “heathens” and “infidels,” never mind caring about their needs. As a result, such “people of faith” are perceived by others as being arrogant, condescending and judgmental ... and with good reason.

Well my friends, today we shall learn that not only is this attitude wrong, but it is a gross distortion and abuse of true faith. Nothing is worse than ignoring another human being. And you really don’t love God if your love for Him does not cause you to be more sensitive to His creatures. As we learn from none other than the pioneer of all religion – Abraham – as we answer some fascinating questions:

When God comes to visit Abraham, how does Abraham have the chutzpah to turn away from God and greet the three wandering strangers?! Would that not be considered rude if done to a mere mortal let alone to God Almighty?!

Why was Rabbi Yehoshua ben Prachiah rebuked for rejecting his student (none other than Jesus)? How does this teach us volumes about the trappings of religious selfishness and the lengths we have to go to ensure that love of God always translates into love of our fellow?

DO YOU LOVE GOD MORE THAN YOU LOVE PEOPLE?

1. Godly Dissonance (Humor)

In the religious area of New York, a rabbi went in search of a new automobile. Upon entering the local car dealership, he was quickly spotted by the salesman.

“Have I got a car for you!” the salesman exclaimed, unable to conceal his delight at finding an obviously religious man, dressed in a dark suit, sporting a long beard, and a yarmulke on his head.

“What do you mean?” the rabbi asked with some apprehension.

“Ah ha,” the salesman said rubbing his hands together. “Let me show you the latest technological advance. An American car with Israeli-designed computerized voice commands.”

“What’s that?” the rabbi asked, hesitating.

“Come right here and let me show you. You will never believe your eyes.” With that the salesman opened the door of the new and shiny sedan. “Please sit down and I will show you. A one of a kind, I tell you. You won’t believe your eyes. You see this car has no pedals. That’s right no gas pedal and no brake pedal.”

“B-But how do you stop and start?”

“Ah, that’s the beauty of this, with the Israeli computerized technology all you have to do is to speak and the digital processor will convert your voice into an electronic signal that tells the motor what to do.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Watch, it’s true. This was programmed for the religious consumer. To start, just say *Baruch HaShem* (Thank God).” And as the salesman spoke those words the car began to drive.

The rabbi was taken back, “Wow, I don’t believe it! How do you stop the car?”

“That’s no problem, all you have to say is *Shema Yisroel* (the prayer declaring the unity of God) and the car will stop.” And as the salesman spoke those words, the car rolled to a halt. “It’s as easy as can be – just say ‘*Baruch HaShem*’ to start and when you want to stop just say *Shema Yisroel*.”

Well, the rabbi was very impressed and bought the car on the spot. Entering the car he said the magic words, *Baruch HaShem* and the car was soon heading out and on to the local highway. Soon the rabbi had left the city behind and was looking at the beautiful country scenery.

As the car continued, the rabbi failed to notice a sign saying that the road was closed. As the car continued it went up onto a half completed bridge. “Oh no! We are going to crash!” Instinctively his feet searched in vain for the brake pedal, but there was none to be found. “What do I say, WHAT DO I SAY!!!” panicking he could not remember what the salesman had told him. His mind was a blank and the car was approaching the end of the unfinished bridge, together with a majestic plunge into a ravine, hundreds of feet below. “This is the end!” the Rabbi thought. And preparing for death he began to declare the unity of God. “*Shema Yisroel!*” he said, and in a moment the car screeched to a stop with half of the car resting in a tilted manner, precariously over the bridge.

The rabbi, soaked with perspiration, removed his trembling hand from his forehead, and looked at the miracle and exclaimed with the a deep feeling of relief: “*BARUCH HASHEM!*”

2. Turning Away From God

Two of our most gracious social mitzvahs are derived from the opening of this week’s Torah portion.

At the outset of this week’s Torah reading,¹ God appears to Abraham as he is healing from his circumcision. We derive from this the mitzvah of visiting the sick, *bikkur cholim*.

¹ Genesis 18:1.

The Torah then continues to relate how Abraham welcomes three strangers into his tent as guests, feeding and serving them. From this we derive the mitzvah of *hachnosat orchim*, welcoming guests into our homes.

But when we read the story closely, we see that the second episode (Abraham greeting the guests) happens in a very strange fashion.

Abraham turns to the guests not *after* the visit from God, but right in middle of it!

Imagine the scene: God is visiting Abraham after his circumcision. They are spending time together. Indeed, this is the first time in history that God makes such an appearance, so you can imagine that it is quite a momentous occasion. Nevertheless, despite the presence of the Divine, Abraham suddenly lifts his eyes and sees three strangers. They appear to him as nomads traveling in the desert. What does Abraham do? He turns away from God to greet and welcome these men!

The Talmud deduces from this that “welcoming guests is greater than welcoming God,” because Abraham turned away from God to greet his guests.²

Beautiful lesson. But the big question is this: How did Abraham know this was the right thing to do? How did he know he had the right – the *chutzpah* even – to turn away from God and greet people?

Even if an ordinary mortal were to come visit you when you were ill, it would be quite rude to turn away from your visitor to chat with other guests! How much more so when the “visitor” is God! And He is making a rare, first-time appearance!

Moreover, how did Abraham even *notice* the guests? You would think that Abraham would be completely absorbed with such a “special” visitor – Almighty God Himself – and not have the presence of mind to be distracted by nomads wandering in the desert.

And yet, Abraham simply turned away from God to welcome some strangers in the wilderness.

² Talmud, Shabbat 127a.

A very puzzling set of circumstances, which lead us to ask: How can greeting guests be greater than greeting God? And what was God thinking when Abraham turned away from him? Was this not an act of sacrilege?

3. What Does it Mean to Love God?

Let's consider the following:

We have a mitzvah to love God, right? In the daily Shema prayer we recite: *V'oahvto et Hashem Elokecho b'chol levavcho, ub'chol nasfeshcho, ub'chol meo'decho*, "Love your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."³

But what does it mean to love God? Does God need our love? Or is it that we need to love God? And what is the *purpose* of loving God?

While we're at it, let's ask: Does loving God include loving other people? After all, we do see people who claim to love God but who do not love others. Indeed, some very devout individuals actually hate others in the name of God!

So, can one love God and not love God's children?

These are very critical questions, especially in our times when we are witnessing so much disillusionment with and alienation from religion. Many people today are disturbed by what they perceive as religious condescension and fundamentalism.

Indeed, this is perhaps the greatest stereotype today about religion, and specifically Judaism. And unfortunately one that has merit. How many Jews today believe that God and good are not necessarily compatible?

You know the Woody Allen quip about the atheist cynic mocking her pious grandfather: "Grandpa, if you had to choose between God and the truth, which would you choose?" Without missing a beat grandpa replies: "God, of course" ...

³ Deuteronomy 6:5.

Tragically, this attitude is not unique to our generation. Throughout history we have seen terrible things done “in the name of God” – including “holy” wars waged, “sacred” crusades unleashed, massacres of innocents in the name of faith.

4. The Good News

The good news is that despite the grotesque distortion and unforgivable abuse perpetrated in the name of God, Abraham and many other true men and women of God remind us that these are indeed stereotypes – grotesque distortions – that do not at all reflect the true meaning of loving God. Quite the contrary: Any expression of hatred and discrimination is an affront to God. Any form of prejudice and bigotry directed against people is utterly and unequivocally antithetical to faith and is in direct opposition to loving God.

Because one who loves God loves what God loves, and God loves the people He created. If you love the Father, you love his children.⁴ One who is uncaring and insensitive to others, one who does not love others, in turn does not truly love God. One who hates others, in effect, hates God.

Ultimately, loving God requires the transcendence of self-love. If loving God becomes another extension of self-love and self-interest, then it is not truly loving God; it is simply self-worship masquerading in the pious cloak of Divine worship.

And the litmus test to determine if this is indeed the case is simple: Does your love of God extend to the love of other people, even those you may not agree with or particularly like?

If your love of God is only about you, then you are unlikely to love other people when it is inconvenient for you. Thus, your love of God can be diluted and even another manifestation of your own self-interests (even if they are spiritual or benevolent ones).

⁴ See *Hayom Yom* 24 Av, 12 Av, 28 Nissan.

If you love others because you feel it may compromise your relationship with God, that shows that your love of God may be just an expression and extension of self-love.

But when you love to others – even when this love may seemingly infringe on some of the time you spend with God – then it becomes very clear that your love of God is true and absolute, not one that is driven by serving your own interests.

If your love of God is complete and pure, then this love will spill over in an unconditional sensitivity and love to all human beings.

5. The Risks of Religious Passion

Religious passion has great risks. In the name of loving and defending God, “religious” people can end up committing the worst crimes against others whom they consider “infidels” or “enemies of God.” As much as people can hurt each other out of their own self-interest, nothing comes close to how destructive they can be when they are convinced that their war is “holy” and divinely mandated.

Thus, when invoking the name of God great care must be taken, lest biased mortals end up using God for their own interests, to the point that they convince themselves – in their deluded state – of the purity of their intentions.

To demonstrate how religious piety should not compromise our sensitivity to one another, consider this powerful Torah law:⁵

Though one is not permitted to speak during the *Shema* prayer, if in middle of the *Shema* you encounter someone who greets you – if you are holding between the sections of the prayer – you should return the greeting of any person who initiates a friendly exchange, so that he not be offended.⁶

⁵ Maimonides, *Laws of Shema* 2:15. Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 66:1. Talmud, *Berachot* 13a-b.

⁶ One is not obligated to do so if the person will not be offended – *Chinuch* 420. Magan Avraham; *Shulchan Aruch Harav* *ibid*.

Why go to such lengths to emphasize the need to greet and not offend another? Prayer, after all, is your private time to speak with God. There are many hours in the day when you can attend to the welfare of others and show your care and concern. Why can't you then use these few minutes to commune with God and not be distracted by greeting others?! Everyone would understand that you are entitled to have a moment to close your eyes and speak to heaven.

Nevertheless, because of the great fear that prayer will become a "selfish" experience, the Torah goes out of its way to make it clear that, even in your spiritual ecstasy, you should always remember that this is not just "about you." You must always be cognizant and sensitive to those around you.

6. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Prachia and Jesus

The Talmud⁷ is critical of the great sage Rabbi Yehoshua ben Prachiah for not pausing in middle of reciting the *Shema* to greet a certain student of his, thus pushing the student away and causing him to forsake Judaism entirely.

You will not believe who this student was – he was none other than Jesus! The story in the Talmud goes like this:

After Rabbi Yehoshua ben Prachiah rebuked his student Jesus for something inappropriate that he had said, Jesus came to him asking to be readmitted as his student, but the Rabbi would not accept him. This happened several times. One day when Rabbi Yehoshua was reciting the *Shema*, Jesus again came to ask to be readmitted. Though Rabbi Yehoshua intended to finally accept him, he would not interrupt the *Shema*. So he made a motion with his hand,⁸ which Jesus mistakenly took as a rejection. Believing that his teacher was pushing him away, Jesus left dejected, never to return...

The sages derive from this sad event a potent lesson (cited in Halacha⁹) about how a teacher should treat a wayward student:

⁷ *Sotah* 47a. *Sanhedrin* 107b (in *Dikdukei Sofrim*).

⁸ Signaling his intent to receive him, according to Rashi, *Sotah* *ibid*.

⁹ *Shulchan Aruch HaRav*, Hilchot Talmud Torah 4:17 and Kuntres Acharon 4:1.

“Do not be like Rabbi Yehoshua ben Prachiah who pushed away his student with both hands.”

If the student seeks earnestly to study, even though he has not changed his errant behavior, the teacher should instruct him, carefully balancing his reproofs with positive reinforcement. This is what Rabbi Yehoshua ben Prachiah failed to do.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Prachiah was a deeply pious man. His students certainly appreciated the fact that, when their great master was reciting the *Shema*, he was completely immersed with utmost devotion in this profound prayer. After all the hours upon hours that Rabbi Yehoshua dedicated to his students, they surely could have forgiven him for not attending to their needs for these few moments when he was speaking to God.

And yet... because of the great traps of religious devotion and its ability to compromise a teacher’s sensitivity to a desperate student, the Torah chastises Rabbi Yehoshua ben Prachiah for pushing away his student – notwithstanding what type of student he was.

Imagine what would have happened had the Rabbi not pushed him away. How different history might have been...

7. To Love God Means To Love His Creatures

Being Godly is being a *mentsch*. Loving God means loving all God’s creations, and being kind to all people.

Now we can understand Abraham’s dramatic behavior of “turning away” from God to greet the wandering strangers.

Long before “religious wars” would wreak havoc in the world, Abraham understood well the great risk and challenge of religious passion. As such, Abraham, father of all nations, pioneer of religion, took strong measures to prevent God from being abused.

Abraham understood that ignoring wandering strangers is, in effect, ignoring God in the deepest way. Because if you love God then you must love what God loves, namely His creatures.

So welcoming guests is welcoming God in a greater way than welcoming God directly.

Had Abraham ignored the nomads, one could argue that it would have been due not to Abraham's respect for God, but to a "religious selfishness."

A story that aptly illustrates this point is told about the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (the author of the Tanya), and his son who would later be known as the Mittlerer Rebbe, Rabbi Dov Ber. One day, these two great Torah scholars – father and son – who were living together in the same house, were once absorbed in their studies. Suddenly, a baby fell out of its crib and starting wailing. The Mittlerer Rebbe was so absorbed in his learning that he did not hear the crying child. The Alter Rebbe, though he lived on the second floor of the house, heard the cries and went to tend to the baby. Later, he told his son that it is not an acceptable approach to be immersed in Torah study and not hear the cry of a child.

Torah study is meant to refine you, to teach you how to help another person, to hear the cry of one in need!

Any religious or spiritual experience has to always make us more sensitive – not less – to other people.

To be so immersed in a religious experience that we ignore the cry of a child, or the call of someone for help, or the needs of weary travelers, is "religious selfishness." And in no way does it bring us any closer to God. It actually pushes God away, not to mention the person in need of our attention.

8. A *Tzaddik in Peltz*

Abraham got that. Abraham got God. And that is precisely why he “turned away” from God to greet the guests.

Abraham understood that there are two ways to greet God. One in which you, but only you, experience the Divine. There is a Yiddish expression for a person who acts like that: *Tzaddik in peltz*, “a righteous person in a fur coat.” This refers to a *tzaddik* who puts on a fur coat to warm himself from the cold. He is indeed a *tzaddik* and does wrap and protect himself in Divine warmth, but no one else gets warmed in the process.

The second way is to light a fire that warms not just you but everyone in the cold room. This is the truest way of loving God – not on your own terms, not when it is convenient for you, not when you are enjoying the experience.

God called Abraham “My beloved” (*Avraham ohavi*)¹⁰ because Abraham understood the true nature of loving God – never to be so consumed by your own divine experience and revelation (even when God is making an unprecedented appearance to you) that you neglect to notice wandering strangers who may be in need.

Had Abraham ignored the nomads that would have been a sign that perhaps Abraham – like the *tzaddik in peltz* – was indulging in his own divine delight. And as such, his love for God would have been diluted with his self-love, albeit a holy love, but one that warmed him and no one else.

So even as Abraham was communing with God, he did not take God’s visit for granted, but maintained his humility; he raised his eyes and saw the wandering strangers.

With this Abraham demonstrated the deepest dimension – and the true meaning – of loving God: To love not yourself and your own piety, but to love everyone unconditionally, even if it means foregoing your own divine revelation. In turn – through greeting his guests Abraham experienced an even greater divine revelation than when God appeared to him!

¹⁰ Isaiah 41:8.

9. Call to Action

As children of Abraham we carry his genes. We also carry the responsibility to perpetuate Abraham's inimitable legacy, which has shaped history and brought civilization to the world.

Considering the prevailing negative stereotypes about religion and faith – that are sadly being fed as we speak – we are compelled to repair and reclaim the beauty of our Jewish heritage. And proclaim it in ways that everyone can hear and see.

Yes, we can. We can do something about the bad Jewish image.

A passenger jet was suffering through a severe thunderstorm. As the passengers were being bounced around by the turbulence, a young man turned to a rabbi sitting next to her and with a nervous laugh asked, "Rabbi, you are a man of God, can't you do something about this storm?"

To which he replied, "Sir, I'm in sales, not management...."

As agents of God in this world, we are, in fact, part of management – we manage how God is perceived by others. When we treat others in a loving and sensitive manner, we create a *Kiddush Hashem* – sanctifying God's name and demonstrating the beauty of God's ways. If, God forbid, we are insensitive and obnoxious to others, we are guilty of a *Chilul Hashem* – desecrating the name of God.

There were two young brothers, 8 and 10 years old, who were exceedingly mischievous. Whatever went wrong in the neighborhood, it turned out they had a hand in it. Their parents were at their wits' end trying to control them.

Hearing about a rabbi nearby who worked with delinquent boys, the mother suggested to her husband that she would ask the rabbi to talk with the boys and he agreed. The mother went to the rabbi and made her request. He agreed, but said he wanted to see the younger boy first and alone. So the mother sent the younger to the rabbi.

The rabbi sat the boy down across his huge, impressive desk. For about five minutes they just sat and stared at each other. Finally, the

rabbi pointed his forefinger at the boy and asked, “Young man, where is God?”

The boy looked under the desk, in the corners of the room, all around, then said nothing. Again, louder, the rabbi pointed at the boy and asked, “Where is God?” Again, the boy looked all around but said nothing. A third time, in a louder, firmer voice, the rabbi leaned far across the desk and put his forefinger almost to the boy’s nose, and asked, “Young man, I ask you, where is God?”

The boy panicked and ran all the way home. Finding his older brother, he dragged him upstairs to their room and into the closet, where they usually plotted their mischief. He finally said, “We’re in Bi-i-i-i-i-i-g trouble.”

The older boy asked, “What do you mean, BIG trouble?”

His brother replied, “God is missing and they think we did it!”

God is missing in so many lives today. Even those that proclaim their faith are missing God if their beliefs do not cause them to be kinder and gentler. We have the power to bring God back into the picture – by recognizing that the greatest love of God is expressed by turning away from our selfish relationship with God and welcoming strangers.

Think about it: In every move you make, in every choice you take, you have the power and responsibility – and also the gift – to create a *Kiddush Hashem*, by showing how love for God makes you love people even more.

So next time you meet a stranger or a friend, even if you are preoccupied with the most important things, do not ignore them. Say hello. Acknowledge their presence. Reach out and offer a helping hand. Invite them to your home.

Love God and you will love His children. Amen.