



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## GENESIS > Vayeira

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November 19, 2016

Vayeira

**Guest List:**

**Where is the Cut-Off Point?**



# Meaningful Sermons

“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”

GENESIS > Vayeira > Guest List: Where is the Cut-Off Point?

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## ABSTRACT

Do you like having guests? Do you enjoy hosting strangers in your home?

They say hospitality is making your guests feel at home, even if you wish they were.

On the more positive side, there is the Yiddish expression: *Ah gahst fahr a veyl zet fahr a meyl* – “A guest for a while sees for a mile.” This means that when an outsider spends time in a new environment, the outsider often sees things that the insiders are blind to.

Sometimes it takes an outsider or an outside occurrence to help us see the beauty and depth of the Torah and its *mitzvot*. In this case, the outside occurrence is the refugee crises in general and the American immigration crisis in particular (which has led President elect, Donald Trump, to propose building a wall between the U.S. and Mexico).

What would the Torah have us do in response to such crises? How are we to understand the great *mitzvah* of welcoming guests, *hachnasat orchim*, in this context? Should our homes be open to everyone? Should Israeli Jews welcome Hamas adherents from Gaza into Tel Aviv? Or should American Jews welcome ISIS members into Boro Park?

May G-d protect us from this!

But where then does hospitality end? And where does it begin?

We find the fascinating answer in a story and insight from Rabbi Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik, the Beit Halevi, in explaining the difference between the welcoming of (the same) guests by Abraham and by his nephew, Lot, in this week’s Torah reading.

## 1. Dinner Guest (Joke)

A businessman was walking down the street when a particularly dirty and shabby-looking homeless man asked him for a couple of dollars for dinner. The businessman took out his wallet, extracted ten dollars and asked, "If I give you this money, will you buy beer with it instead of dinner?"

"No, I had to stop drinking years ago," the homeless man replied.

"Will you use it to go fishing instead of buying food?" the businessman asked.

"No, I don't really have the luxury of going fishing," the homeless man said. "I need to spend all my time trying to stay alive."

"Will you spend this on green fees at a golf course instead of food?" the businessman asked.

"Are you nuts?!" replied the homeless man. "I haven't played golf in 20 years!"

"Well, in that case," said the businessman, "I'm not going to give you the money. Instead, I'm going to invite you to my home as my honored guest to enjoy a terrific four-course dinner cooked by my wife!"

The homeless man was astounded. "Won't your wife be furious with you for doing that? I know I'm dirty, and I probably smell awful."

The businessman replied, "That's okay. I want her to see what a man looks like after he has given up beer, fishing, and golf."

## 2. Hachnasat Orchim

The reasons for inviting guests into your home are many. Perhaps you may do so because the Torah commands you to. Perhaps you may do so because your forefather Abraham did. Perhaps you may do so because you're just a nice person. And perhaps you may do so to prove a (childish) point to your wife.

There is a Yiddish expression: *Ah gahst fahr a veyl zet fahr a meyl* - “A guest for a while sees for a mile.” This means that when an outsider spends time in a new environment, the outsider often sees things that the insiders may be blind to.

Sometimes it takes an outsider or an outside occurrence to help us see the beauty and depth of the Torah and its mitzvot. In this case, the outside occurrence is the refugee crises in general and the American immigration crisis in particular (which has led President elect, Donald Trump, to propose building a wall between the U.S. and Mexico).

What would the Torah have us do in response to such crises? How are we to understand the great mitzvah of welcoming guests, *hachnasat orchim*, in this context? Should our homes be open to everyone? Should Israeli Jews welcome, for example, Hamas adherents from Gaza into Tel Aviv? Or should American Jews welcome ISIS members into Boro Park?

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### 3. Parshat Vayeira

There is no question that *hachnasat orchim* is an important mitzvah. In the morning prayers, every day, we quote the Mishnah which lists hospitality to strangers as one of the key precepts of the Torah.<sup>1</sup>

We learn this precept from our forefather, Abraham, who sets the example in this week’s Torah reading, where Abraham welcomes wandering nomads into his tent:

He [Abraham] lifted his eyes and he saw three men standing a short distance from him. When he saw [them] from the entrance of the tent, he ran to greet them, bowing down to the ground. And he said, “My lords, if I have found favor in your eyes, please do not go on without stopping by me. Please let a little water be brought to wash

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<sup>1</sup> Pe’ah 1:1.

your feet. Rest under the tree. And I will bring a morsel of bread for you to refresh yourselves." ... And Abraham rushed to Sarah's tent and said, "Hurry! [Take] three measures of the finest flour, knead it and make cakes." [Then] Abraham ran to the cattle, and chose a tender, choice calf and he gave it to a young man [his servant] who rushed to prepare it.<sup>2</sup>

Later on, we read that Abraham's nephew Lot emulated his uncle's great hospitality while living in Sodom<sup>3</sup>:

And the two angels came to Sodom in the evening, while Lot was sitting at the city gate. Lot saw them and arose to greet them, bowing with his face to the ground. And he said, "Please my lords, turn to my house. Spend the night, wash your feet, and continue on your way early in the morning." But they said, "No, we will spend the night in the square." [Lot] kept urging them until they finally relented and came to his house. He made a feast for them and baked unleavened cakes, and they ate.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4. The Beit HaLevi (Story)

Rabbi Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik, known as the Beit Halevi, asks a fascinating question:

In both these episodes, the guests are the same. And yet we find that Abraham's hospitality is heralded for all eternity, while Lot's hospitality is hardly known and certainly marginalized. Why is this?

The question becomes even more pointed when we know that hospitality in Sodom was punishable by death! Why is Lot's hospitality then not remembered as well?

The Beit HaLevi answers this question by looking at the different words the Torah uses to describe Abraham's guests and Lot's guests, even though they were really the same guests. Abraham's guests are called

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 18:2-7.

<sup>3</sup> See Rashi to Genesis 19:1, from Tanchuma, Vayeira 15, that Lot learned hospitality from Abraham.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 19:1-3.

men (*anashim*) while Lot's guests are called angels (*malachim*). There is a key difference if you think you are welcoming ordinary homeless nomads or angels from on high.

The Beit HaLevi's explanation emerges from an unpleasant incident which happened to him when he lodged at an inn whose owner treated him very rudely. When the innkeeper later discovered the identity of his guest, he apologized justifying his actions with: "I did not realize who you were."

The Beit HaLevi responded with the following teaching:

The Torah recounts Abraham's hospitality at great length, whereas Lot's hospitality is not accorded the same prestige. This is because Abraham did not know that his guests were actually angels. Thinking they were nomadic Arabs,<sup>5</sup> Abraham still ran to greet them and attended to all of their needs, all the while believing they were regular people. Lot, on the other hand, knew they were angels – for the Torah explicitly states, *malachim*, angels, not *anashim*, men. He thought of the honor he would accrue by hosting G-d's messengers, and when he saw them, he merely arose (without running to meet them) to attend to their needs.<sup>6</sup>

## 5. The Breadth of Abraham's Hospitality

This is why Abraham is known for his hospitality, while Lot is known for less savory things.

From here, we learn the breadth of Abraham's hospitality. Some people only invite "angels" into their homes – those who are respectable, honorable, and angelic. But Abraham made no such distinction. He actually invited men who he thought were nomadic Arabs into his home.

His example teaches us that hospitality means inviting human beings and not angels. Indeed, hospitality may be predicated upon inviting the opposite of angels – the dirty, weary, foreign. Even such unsavory people we must invite into our homes.

<sup>5</sup> Rashi to Genesis 18:4, from Genesis Rabbah 54:4.

<sup>6</sup> See Rashi to Genesis 19:1 for a more literal interpretation to "men" vs. "angels."

## 6. Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor (Optional)

This perhaps is the origin of the words of the Jewish poet Emma Lazarus which are inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty:

*Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*<sup>7</sup>

## 7. The Depth of Abraham's Hospitality

In addition to the wide breadth of Abraham's hospitality, there is also a luxurious depth. You could invite many people but give them the bare minimum; or you could invite a few people and give them the maximum. Or you could invite the maximum number and treat them with the maximum luxury. This is what Abraham did.

We find an interesting study in parallels in Avot D'rabbi Nattan, a Talmudic-era text.<sup>8</sup>

Avot D'rabbi Nattan extols the hospitality of Job but says that no matter how great his hospitality was, it doesn't come even half as close to the greatness of Abraham's hospitality:

You, Job sit in your home waiting until guests come to you. Then you feed them whatever they are used to eating: those whose diet consists of bread, you give them bread; those who eat meat, you give them meat; those who are used to drinking wine, you give them wine. But Abraham acted differently. Abraham would go out of his house to look for guests, and when he found them he would usher them into his home. Whoever was not used to eating bread, he would serve them bread; whoever did not have the luxury of eating

<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emma\\_Lazarus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emma_Lazarus)

<sup>8</sup> This text usually printed (with the minor tractates) at the end of Seder Nezikin in the Talmud.

meat before, he would serve them meat; and whoever was not privy to wine, he would give them wine. Abraham expanded people's palates and horizons, while you Job merely fed them what they expected.

Moreover! Abraham built huge tents on the desert paths and roadways, and he stocked them with delicious food and drink. All the wayfarers would stop and enter these tents, sate themselves, and then Abraham would inspire them to bless G-d and thank Him for their sustenance. This is why Abraham and his hospitality brought G-d pleasure.

## 8. The Message: Invite All, Serve All

This perhaps should be the Jewish take on refugees, on building walls, on welcoming all guests no matter how unappealing.

Indeed, this is one of the great blessings of the United States: To serve as a safe haven to refugees and immigrants from all over the world. We Jews in particular owe a tremendous debt of gratitude for this country's hospitality.

Of course, there is the ideal and the real.

Let us first agree on the ideal. The ideal, as our ancestor Abraham (and his wife Sarah) established, is to invite all of humanity into our homes and to serve them delicacies.

At the same time, borders and laws are equally vital to uphold, in order to maintain order and stability.

Especially, if there is a real security threat, like there unfortunately is in Israel (and, increasingly, in Europe - and in the United States as well), then saving lives obviously overrides all else.<sup>9</sup>

However, this real situation does not change the ideal that all of humanity should be welcome under the same tent, albeit with a proper system in place.

And once our guests enter into that tent together, the way to treat them is with abounding luxury. We must go out of our way to welcome them,

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<sup>9</sup> Except for three essential commandments of murder, idolatry, and immorality.



our ultimate goal being that all guests end up thanking G-d for all the sustenance He provides.

As the Torah reminds us time and again: Be kind to strangers, for you were once a stranger.<sup>10</sup>

Let the security experts worry about security and build what they have to build, protect whom they have to protect. Our job is to remember Abraham's ideal, the Jewish ideal – to teach the whole world that it is G-d who provides their sustenance so that they may acknowledge Him as its source and thank Him for His gifts.

## 9. Be A Host With A Long Guest List

Personally as well, we have to work on ourselves both in breadth (the scope of whom we invite) and in depth (how well we treat them).

Say you only invite family, so now stretch yourself to also invite a co-worker. Broaden your pool of guests. Don't only invite angels. Invite dusty human beings, nomads, wayfarers. Obviously only people who aren't dangerous. But there are many fine, non-threatening human beings who need an invitation. Go out of your comfort zone to make someone else comfortable.

And also, go above and beyond. Unlike Job, do not only serve the predictable. Like Abraham, serve delicacies, things your guests would not expect. This will wow them and bring you ever closer to the purpose of inviting guests in the first place.

So that they – and you, and your family – may thank and bless the Creator for all He has given and will continue to give you, in sustenance and blessing.

Sometimes it takes a guest to remind us of the blessings we have.

Shabbat Shalom!

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<sup>10</sup> See Exodus 22:20. 23:9.