10-31-26 Message to Roeh Israel Abilene – VaYera (and He appeared)
Torah Portion; Genesis 18:1 – 22:24
Haftarah: 2 Kings 4:1-37
Suggested Acheron K'tuvim: Rom 14:15-20

Mysterious Visitors and Good Food

Central question of this message: What did Avram feed the visitors, and how is that important to us today?

We are in the parashah *VaYera*. It means "and He appeared." The parashah takes its name from the fourth word in the English and the first word in the original Hebrew.

Gen 18:1-3

> 18 And the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. 2 He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth 3 and said, "O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant.

18:1 וַיֵּרָ֣א אֵלָ֔יו יְהוָ֖ה בְּאֵלֹנֵ֣י מַמְרֵ֑א וְהוּא

And appeared unto him the Lord in the plains of Mamre: and he

7200 413 3068 436 4471 1931

יֹשֵׁ֣ב פֶּֽתַח־הָאֹ֖הֶל כְּחֹ֥ם הַיּֽוֹם׃

sat in door the tent of in the heat the day;

3427 6607 168 2527 3117

2 וַיִּשָּׂ֤א עֵינָיו֙ וַיַּ֔רְא וְהִנֵּ֥ה שְׁלֹשָׁ֖ה אֲנָשִׁ֣ים

And he lift up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men

5375 5869 7200 2009 7969 376

נִצָּבִ֣ים עָלָ֑יו וַיַּ֣רְא וַיָּ֤רָץ לִקְרָאתָם֙

stood by him: when he saw them, and he ran to meet them

5324 5921 7200 9999 7323 7125

מִפֶּ֣תַח הָאֹ֔הֶל וַיִּשְׁתַּ֖חוּ אָ֥רְצָה׃

from door, the tent and bowed himself toward the ground,

6607 168 7812 776

3 וַיֹּ֣אמַר אֲדֹנָ֗י אִם־נָ֤א מָצָ֨אתִי֙ חֵ֣ן בְּעֵינֶ֔יךָ אַל־

And said, My Lord, if now I have found favour in thy sight, not

559 113 518 4994 4672 2580 5869 408

נָ֣א תַעֲבֹ֔ר מֵעַ֖ל עַבְדֶּֽךָ׃

I pray thee, pass away, from thy servant:

4994 5674 5921 5650

Our people have had many discussions over the generations regarding these three visitors. The discussions revolve around the identity of these beings, and the use of the 4-letter Name which we found prominently featured even in the first few words: " And the LORD appeared to him…"

A popular recent interpretation by many Jewish sources is that G-d visited Avram first, and even before G-d could speak His message, three visitors came up. Abraham then interrupted G-d and insisted upon an act of hospitality before he would allow G-d to continue speaking. It is from this interpretation that our people have determined that hospitality is a higher mitzvah even than a visitation from G-d. I tend to think that the reason our people have come up with this interpretation was to minimize, or even dismiss, the concept that Messiah would appear to Avram in bodily form.

Although I believe hospitality is a mitzvah, I don't believe it is worthy of higher honor than a visitation from the Holy One. That simply doesn't make sense to me at all.

More modern Jewish commentators have rejected the more ancient theological concept that Messiah could take on bodily form and walk among us as a man. I believe that this was done as a reaction against the fact that believers in Yeshua as Messiah firmly held to the more ancient theology that He would come into this world as a man – which was the accepted understanding of countless generations before the first century.

I believe that the Jewish sages who rejected the Messiahship of Yeshua also needed to reject the concept of a bodily form, to make their theology work. So, for a number of more recent generations, this new understanding of G-d showing up before the three visitors has displaced what I believe to be the older, and more theologically sound interpretation.

There is no doubt that these are angelic beings, at a minimum. It is clear from the passage that Avram refers to one of them as L-rd – the 4-letter Name for G-d. It is also clear that that one of them receives worship.

We know that the Father did not appear to Avram, because no man has seen His face and survived.[1] But this being *did* accept worship. We know that no holy angel will accept worship, so this one with the two angels must be none other than Yeshua. There is no other option.

And Yeshua, together with the two angels, all eat what Avram served them. I believe that this passage provides the underpinning for the idea that people have provided hospitality to angels without being aware that they were doing so. In fact, I believe that the author of the book Hebrews referred directly to this passage when he wrote:

Heb 13:1-2

[1] Exod 33:20

> Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

The remarkable thing about these beings is that they were in many ways apparently identical to people. Beyond looking just like men, they walked, left footprints, cast shadows, and could eat a meal.[2]

The one thing that is most startling about them from this passage is that they didn't simply "come walking up" to Avram. They just "appeared" in front of him, apparently "out of thin air." And what did Avram do about this amazing event? He offered them hospitality.

And it is from this generous offer of hospitality that the Jewish people have derived the belief that giving hospitality to others – and maybe especially to strangers – is a high mitzvah.[3] Some have even postulated that because of her work to prepare the bread for these strangers, Sarah's body was restored immediately to child-bearing condition.[4]

I want to now address what was served to these exalted visitors.

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[2] Although there is much discussion among our Sages that angels are unable to "eat" that they merely pretended to eat in order to not insult Avram as a gracious host. I do not follow their logic on this, and I believe when such angels take human form, they are also given the bodies of humans sufficiently enough so that they can actually eat as well. To conclude otherwise would require me to contradict the clear statement of Torah in this parasha.

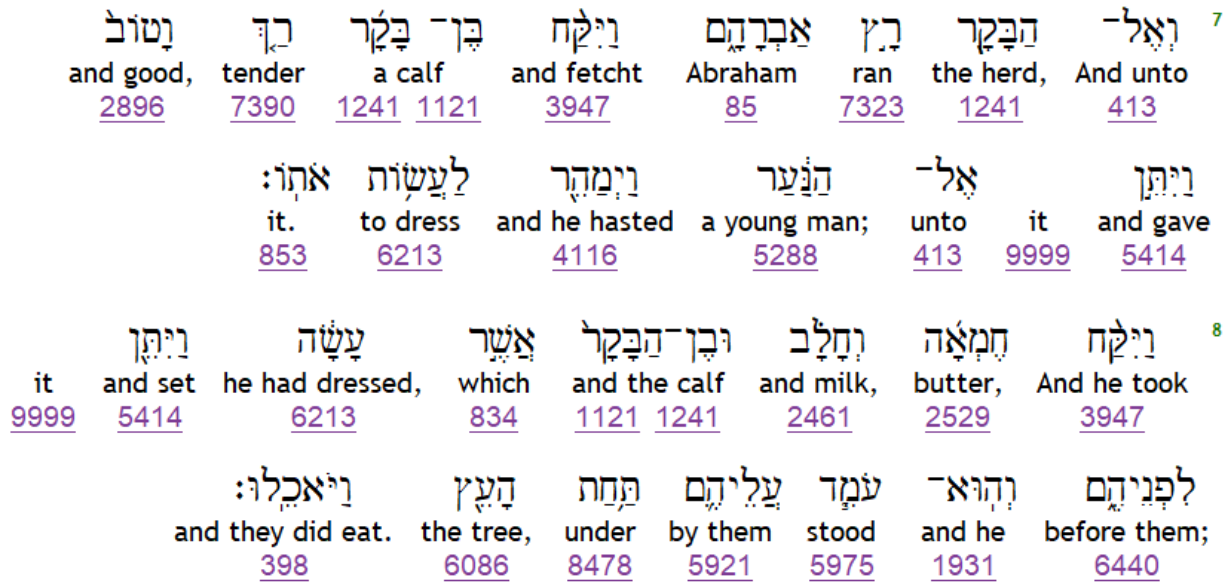
[3] Rabbi Yochanan said that hospitality is one of the things one can do that not only gain him benefits in this world but also in the world to come. Shabbat 127a:14

[4] And at that time, her menses began again while kneading the dough. And since she became ritually impure immediately, and since her hands were in the dough, and since Avram only ate ritually pure foods, she stepped away from the dough before it could rise. This explains, they say, why bread was not served to the three beings who had arrived.

Gen 18:4-8

> 4 Please let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree; 5 and I will bring a piece of bread, that you may refresh yourselves; after that you may go on, since you have visited your servant. "And they said," So do, as you have said." 6 So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Quickly, prepare three measures of fine flour, knead it, and make bread cakes." 7 Abraham also ran to the herd, and took a tender and choice calf, and gave it to the servant; and he hurried to prepare it. 8 And he took curds and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and placed it before them; and he was standing by them under the tree as they ate.

Focus for now on verses 7 and 8.



The literal translation of the word found at the end of verse 8 in the Hebrew is “and they ate.” There is no question in the Hebrew as to whether they ate or didn’t eat the milk and meat at this meal. Why is that an issue at all? It is because of an interpretation of this verse which appears later in Torah.

Ex 34:26

> You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk." [5]

The Jewish people have argued regarding how to apply this particular verse for generations. I am informed that there have been some records unearthed which record whether, and how, one should observe the separation of meat and milk. The result of this generations-long conversation has been that the more influential voices of our Sages have settled on an interpretation that is somewhat more broad than the literal words would allow.

In *Shulchan Arukh*, Yoreh De'ah 87:1 we find:

> The Scripture reiterates three times the negative precept: "Do not cook a kid in its mother's milk," to indicate the triple

[5] This command appears once again at Deut 14:21

> prohibition applied to the mixture of meat and milk: First, the prohibition of cooking it, second, the prohibition of eating it, and finally, the prohibition of deriving any benefit from it. The Scripture uses the term "cook" for the prohibition of eating to teach us that, according to biblical law, the mixture of meat and milk is prohibited only when it is in a cooked state, that is, hot; but it is prohibited in all forms by rabbinic ordinance.

And in *Mishneh Torah*, Forbidden Foods 9:3 we find:

> According to Scriptural Law, the prohibition involves only [a mixture of] meat from a kosher domesticated animal and milk from a kosher domesticated animal, as implied by the verse: "Do not cook a kid in its mother's milk." The term "a kid" includes the offspring of an ox, the offspring of a sheep, and the offspring of a goat unless the verse states explicitly, a goat-kid. The term "a kid in its mother's milk" [does not exclude all other situations]. Instead, the Torah is speaking regarding the commonplace circumstance.

So you see how an entire body of Rabbinic law has developed over time regarding the prohibition of mixing of milk and meat at the same meal.

That interpretation has persisted to the present day. We find at the Chabad website the following:[6]

> Kosher foods are divided into three categories: meat, dairy and pareve. One of the basic principles of kashrut is the total separation of meat and dairy products. Meat and dairy may not be cooked or eaten together. To ensure this, the kosher kitchen contains separate sets of dishes, utensils, cookware, and separate preparation areas for meat and dairy. A third category, pareve, is comprised of foods which are neither meat nor dairy and may therefore be eaten with either.
>
> Meat and dairy foods may not be cooked together or eaten together. One may not even derive benefit from a combination of meat and dairy foods; for example, selling such a combined product or feeding it to a pet.
>
> To ensure this total separation, the kosher kitchen requires the use of separate utensils, accessories and appliances for meat and dairy. It is useful to have some separate pareve utensils as well.

[6] https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/82658/jewish/Separating-Meat-Dairy-and-Pareve.htm

Given this particular more modern ruling, how did our people resolve the obvious problem created by the statement in our parasha, "and they ate."?

We find in *Siftei Chakhamim* the rationale:

> How could Avraham give them butter, milk and a calf? It is mixing milk and meat! An answer is: He first gave them the milk, and afterward the meat. Alternatively, [he first gave the meat,] and held like the *Halochos Gedolos*, [cited in Tur, Yoreh De'ah 89]: through cleaning out [the mouth by eating and drinking pareve items,] one is then permitted to eat cheese.[7]

It is based on the idea that if a person is seated before a table where both milk and meat dishes are served, he can eat them separately. And if the meat is eaten first, then the person must "clean out" his mouth by eating or drinking pareve items first. Then he is permitted to eat dairy.

I find this analysis unsatisfying. That is because if one really believes that mixing milk and meat together in one meal is prohibited by Scripture, then

[7] Siftei Chakhamim, Genesis 18:8:2

how does eating or rinsing the mouth with pareve foods keep the milk and meat from mixing in the stomach or intestines? If G-d knows that for some reason this mixture is harmful to us, or renders us unholy, then why is the order things enter the mouth more important than the mixing of those items in the stomach or intestines?

And in *The Kehot Chumash; A Chasidic Commentary* we have another analysis of this passage:

> He first brought some cream and milk, and when the calf that Ishmael had prepared was ready, he placed it before them: If Abraham, as we have seen, indeed observed all the laws of the Torah even before they were given at Mount Sinai, how could he have served milk and meat together at the same meal, blatantly violating the Torah's dietary laws?
>
> Two possible answers to this question are: (a) Abraham served the dairy food first, for it is permissible to eat meat a short time after eating dairy food; and (b) Abraham offered the two types of food separately, allowing his guests to choose either type but not both. [8]

[8] The Kehot Chumash; A Chasidic Commentary, Genesis 18:8:1

I find this analysis a bit more plausible, because the passage doesn't indicate that the holy visitors to Avram ate *everything* that was set before them.

But my view differs from this analysis as well. I believe that G-d was telling us that we are not to be caught-up in the pagan practices of those in the lands we are going to conquer – the Promised land. Let's put the verse of prohibition back into context.

Ex 34:26

> 26 You shall bring the very first of the first fruits of your soil into the house of the Lord your God. You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk.

Does the second command in this verse have something to do with the soil, or the first fruits it produces? It would seem so. A Ugaritic text dated 1500 BCE records a pagan ritual which was thought to ensure fertility for their fields.[9]

> "This law is now generally understood to make allusion to a Canaanite religious practice, in which a kid was boiled in its

[9] See, https://library.biblicalarchaeology.org/endnote/endnote-11-you-shall-not-boil-a-kid-in-its-mothers-milk/

mother's milk. This practice was included in the rituals at Ugarit, when such a dish was prepared at restal ceremonies pertaining to the fertility of the soil"); George Angus Fulton Knight, Theology as Narration; A Commentary on the Book of Exodus (1976), p. 151 ("In the fourteenth century B.C. boiling a kid in its mother's milk was accepted ritual act. Probably beginning as an ancient taboo it was later bound up with the acceptance and use or incest as an act of worship")

Given the somewhat strained and even scientifically inconsistent rationale's offered by our Sages for a prohibition of mixing milk and meat, I think I have found a far more satisfying answer. I believe G-d was once again telling us to not participate in the pagan practices of the nations around us. This command is the last of some holiness commands which show us how to behave in a way which distances us from those cultures, and draws us closer to G-d and His ways.

We are to be a peculiar people, and our lives are to be an open testimony to the nations around us of our devotion to G-d and His ways. Distancing ourselves from pagan practices regarding animal sacrifices seems to be a major theme of His commandments.

Why is this important to us today? Because we are still surrounded by people who observe pagan practices, and have incorporated them into their daily lives. Later today, the highest pagan holy day begins at sunset. It is a celebration of death. Today it is called Halloween, but to the ancient pagans, it was called Soween – a festival to honor Baal.

I was challenged to deal with the words, "and they ate" as I was growing in the faith of my fathers. Let me tell you how it went.

When I began following G-d and His ways more closely, I was also zealous for holiness. I also kept kosher to the best of my ability, but I also adopted as part of that the prohibition of mixing milk and meat. I didn't have two sets of dishes, nor two separate dishwashers, nor two sets of silverware. But I was awfully strict on the separation of milk and meat in what we ate.

But that practice was not at all comfortable for my new bride Pam. She was working hard to come into a new lifestyle that was quite unfamiliar to her. She saw that my actions were based on Scripture, and she understood that this formed a solid foundation. But she wanted to not only adopt those ways, but to understand the reason for them. She did not consider that G-d would hide the rationale behind important commands

from His people. As she searched the Scriptures, she found the command regarding not boiling a kid in its mother's milk.

She approached me with her Bible in hand, and pointing to the passage, and told me, "I promise, *really promise*, that I will *never* boil a kid in its mother's milk." At that point, I needed to make a decision.

It was clear to me that she was chafing under the orthodox application of that particular command, and was hoping for some relief. That caused me to start searching the Scriptures for the answer.

I knew that I probably could compromise my beliefs in favor of the doctrine of "*shalom bayit*" (peace in the home being an important factor) but I felt I needed a better justification – one that I could defend.

I found my answer, and a beautiful cornerstone, in the phrase found in our parasha, "… and they ate." I could see that Messiah was among these holy beings sitting at Avram's table. Even if not, I believed that holy angels would not go against Torah in their interactions with mankind. And if Messiah were one of these beings, then I knew He would most certainly not go against Torah – simply because He is the one who spoke it in the first place.

In the end, I chose to moderate my milk and meat separation. And that has resulted in a far more harmonious home than might have otherwise been possible.

But I am still very sensitive to the beliefs of the Orthodox community as well. So, when I am going out to eat, I still often avoid milk and meat in the same meal. I don't wish for my food choices to be a problem to my brothers.

I think the guidance of Paul to the Roman congregation is good because it prioritizes love for one another over the concept of whether food prepared in one way or another is in some way deficient.

Rom 14:15-20

> 15 For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. 16 Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; 17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. 18 For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. 19 So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and

the building up of one another. 20 Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food.

I saw another example of this lived-out once by one of our most precious saints – Eliezar Urbach.

Our congregation in Denver had a celebration at a local park. We gathered to play games, have fellowship, and some food. It was in the "pot luck" style, and everyone brought some hamburgers or hotdogs to put on the shul's grill, where some of our men were stationed to cook. We would all share in the combined food.

One new family brought some hotdogs, but were not careful regarding their contents. They were placed on the grill with the others, and all sat there in a nice row, beside all the kosher hotdogs. It turned out those hotdogs had pork in them.

Someone recognized the wrapper, and snatched it from the trash. He read the contents, and nodded with furrowed brow. He commented to another standing beside him. And the news spread like fire from one to another, standing around the grill.

Eliezar heard the buzz and shook his head. He was disgusted as well, but not with the contents of the hotdogs. He was disgusted because of the lack of love.

He walked over to the grill, grabbed a fork, jabbed it into one of the pork hotdogs, and pulled it from the fire. He held it up to examine it as all the people's eyes turned to him. Then he put one end of the hotdog into his mouth and took a bite. As he held up the incomplete hotdog and chewed that bite, he slowly turned and looked around the circle, making eye contact with everyone. Those who had been whispering stood in silence.

Without a word, his message was transmitted to everyone, loud and clear. To injure a sweet new family who was trying to become more connected to G-d in our congregation over something as trivial as a few hotdogs was far more serious than eating tref.

I don't know who ate those tref hotdogs, but they were eaten just like the kosher ones were.

Our congregation must be known by our love. For our love for one another is the way that the world will know we have the right G-d and the right Messiah.[10]

[10] John 13:35, 1 Thes 3:12, 1 Peter 4:8

This is why I choose not to be too strict on the rules of kashrut regarding the foods that are brought into our oneg time. We all know the basics of kosher, and that is sufficient for me at this time.

But one thing I *will* be very strict about – that we excel in love for one another, and that love characterize our interactions.