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IMITATING THE CREATOR

*What is the proper path that a man should pursue?
Whatever is of intrinsic value to himself and also earns
him the esteem of his fellow men.¹*

Ethics of our Fathers (2:1)

ABRAHAM KEEPS GOD WAITING

If you had to choose between chatting with God Himself and conversing with a mere mortal, what would you do? Most people might say, “How could you possibly turn down a conversation with God?” Yet, Abraham’s actions demonstrate otherwise. In the midst of talking with God—“And God appeared to him in the Plains of Mamre”²—Abraham noticed three travelers in idolater’s garb.³ Faced with choosing between a prophetic revelation—the greatest joy imaginable on earth⁴—and an act of hospitality to idolaters, Abraham astonishingly asks God to please wait so he could tend to the travelers’ needs.⁵

1 The translation is according to the *Ran, Nedarim* 23a.

2 Genesis 18:1.

3 *Ibid.*, v. 2.

4 *Chochmah U'Mussar*, vol. 1, no. 155.

5 Genesis 18:2–3: “And he (Abraham) said: ‘Lord, if I have found favor in your eyes, do not pass

What is most surprising about this incident is that God actually listens to Abraham and waits while Abraham scurries off to invite the travelers in, only to continue their prophetic conversation afterward.⁶

How could Abraham be so brazen as to leave God waiting? And why would God agree to this? Furthermore, the Torah is known for its conciseness; as a rule, it gives tenets or examples and leaves us to determine how to apply the principle to our life.⁷ For instance, the Torah instructs us to take care of our physical health.⁸ It doesn't tell us the details of brushing our teeth, what diet to follow, or how to exercise.

But here, the Torah goes into great detail. We see how Abraham fussed over his guests. He washed their feet,⁹ hurried to order cakes made of fine flour,¹⁰ and ran to select a choice calf from his herd for their meal.¹¹ Why does the Torah, normally so concise, go into such detail with Abraham?

On the face of it, the Torah details Abraham's hospitality to emphasize the importance of kindness and hospitality, declaring that an act of hospitality is greater than receiving the face of the *Shechinah* (God's presence on earth).¹² Abraham was therefore right to interrupt his prophecy with God to tend to his guests. How can such a thing be true?

Understanding this requires a radical reformulating of what we define as being spiritual.

GIVING IS HOLIER THAN PROPHECY

We are used to thinking of giving as a humanistic trait, while prophecy is something uber-spiritual. But this is wrong.

It is not only hospitality alone that is greater than prophecy. The fulfillment of any commandment is a greater level of spirituality than

over (i.e., leave) your servant.” See the *Malbim* on this verse. The word used here for God can also mean “my master,” in which case it can also refer to the leading of the three guests.

6 Genesis 18:22, as per *Rashi*.

7 *Ramban*, Deuteronomy 6:18.

8 Deuteronomy 4:9.

9 Genesis 18:4.

10 *Ibid.*, v. 6.

11 *Ibid.*, v. 7. We will explore this in greater depth in Chapter 46.

12 Tractate *Shabbat* 127a; Tractate *Shevuot* 35b.

having a private meditation with God.¹³ For the latter is a gift, and therefore never really becomes a part of the person, while the former is an acquisition and internalization of a real God-like quality.¹⁴ “It is not abstract contemplation but fresh pulsating faithful-to-God active life that attains proximity to God.”¹⁵

SELF-TRANSCENDENCE

The American novelist, Louis L’Amour, pointed out, “There will come the time when you believe everything is finished. That will be the beginning.”¹⁶ The reason for that is that man was created to actualize himself by reaching beyond himself through self-transcendence.

How do we self-transcend? By imitating God. One of the words related to the word *adam*, is the word *adameh*, “I will be like.” *Adameh le’Elyon*—“I will be like the Above.” Man should be God-like.¹⁷ We are literally meant to imitate the way we see God manifest Himself in this world.¹⁸

The word *adameh* comes from the word *dimyon*,¹⁹ which means imagination. It is our imagination that *allows* us to leap beyond ourselves and to become more God-like. The ability to see beyond oneself and to have a vision and goals opens endless opportunities for man’s growth and, by the same measure, for massive self-deception.²⁰ It can be used for all kinds of fantasies, such as lusting after power or sensual encounters, or to dream of being rich and famous as secrets to happiness.²¹ But it is that same power that gives us a vision of ourselves as holy.

13 Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Michtav Me’Eliyahu*, vol. 2, p. 80.

14 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 140.

15 Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, Genesis 18:2–3.

16 Louis L’Amour, *Lonely on the Mountain*.

17 Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen, *Machashavot Charutz*, no. 3. In Hebrew, *adameh le’Elyon*, “I will be like He who is above.”

18 See Chapter 11.

19 Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen, *Machashavot Charutz*, no. 3.

20 *Ibid.*

21 See Chapter 8 for the use of imagination in activating our *yetzer hara*—our negative inclination.

The human soul is capable of “contraction” (*tzimtzum*), to form an ego that draws its boundaries tightly around the self, excluding the rest of the world. Some *tzimtzum* is essential, for otherwise we have no sense of self, no individuation. But, too tightly drawn, it tragically excludes anything beyond the self, including a relationship with God and one’s fellow man. This reduces man to a pathetic and diminished egotistical self.

To find God and to connect to man requires *hitpashtut*, “expansion of the soul.” Such a soul adventures beyond its self-made walls to apprehend God. That expansion can begin in different

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ways, either by accessing our deepest inner spirituality—called *ha’sechel ha’neelam*, “the unknowable mind” in the Kabbalistic literature—or by connecting beyond ourselves through action—most clearly by engaging the Commandments.

EMULATING GOD

God in His essence will always be beyond reach: “And God said: ‘You cannot see My face, for no man can see me and live.’”²² The essence of God remains an ineffable mystery. Hence, the Torah is not a book about the thoughts of man about God. Rather, it contains the thoughts of God on humanity. The Torah is our guide for understanding human conditions from God’s point of view,²³ thereby demonstrating the proper approach to our fellow men.

We still can have a close relationship with God, even though we can’t fully understand Him. It is not necessary to comprehend the Supernal Being for the moral behavior of man in this world.²⁴ When we study God’s Torah, do His commandments, or pray to Him, we are relating to God.

22 Exodus 33:20.

23 Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, *ibid.*

24 Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, *Collected Writings*, vol. 3.

There is another type of relationship that we can have with God. Although we cannot understand God in His essence, we can understand how God interacts with us, i.e., His actions in the world.

God's actions in this world are acts of giving.²⁵ When we emulate Him by giving as well, we draw ourselves closer to Him by harmonizing ourselves with His actions. We become God-like when we choose to bestow good on others.²⁶ Just like He creates good, so do we. "And you should walk in His ways."²⁷ That is what creates our connection with God. That connection is a deep and satisfying experience.²⁸

This explains why Abraham prioritized his guests over his prophetic conversation with God. Prophecy is a passive process in which the prophet receives a gift from God. Kindness, on the other hand, is a proactive deed. It is to act in this world, to participate in fixing the world, and to become a partner in the creation process itself.²⁹

We are not being asked to serve God and man. God makes it clear that we serve Him when we honor our fellow.

WALKING IN HIS WAYS

The Sages gave examples of what it means to "walk in His ways":

- Just as God clothed the naked as he did with Adam and Eve after their sin,³⁰ we should clothe the naked.
- Just as God visited the sick when He conversed in a prophetic vision with Abraham on the third day of his circumcision,³¹ we should visit the sick.
- Just as God comforted the mourning as he did with Isaac on the death of his father, Abraham,³² we should comfort mourners.

25 *Maharal, Chiddushei Aggadata*, Tractate Sotah 14a.

26 *Ramchal, Derech Hashem* 1:2:2.

27 Deuteronomy 28:8-9, 10:12.

28 *Ramchal, Daat Tevunot* 24.

29 See the *Netziv, Haamek Davar* ad loc.

30 Genesis 3:21, "And God made for the man and for his wife coats of leather, and He dressed them."

31 *Ibid.* 18:1, "And God appeared to him in the plains of Mamre."

32 *Ibid.* 25:11, "And it was after the death of Abraham that God blessed Isaac his son."

- Just as God buried the dead as He did with Moses,³³ we should bury the dead.

And so, we are not just being good; we are being holy when we are being kind.³⁴ When we honor our fellow, we serve Him. If we love Him, we will love His creations.

ABRAHAM SACRIFICES HIS KABBALISTIC KNOWLEDGE

Abraham didn't just discover the existence of God; he discovered the way of God. Therefore, when initiating his spiritual lineage, Abraham chose *chessed*—giving and kindness—as the trait that he would develop to the nth degree.³⁵ Indeed, *chessed* has become the hallmark of the Jewish People.

In order for Abraham to become a perfected giving personality, he had to forgo some aspects of spirituality. Abraham did not achieve the exalted heights in Kabbalistic wisdom as some of those who preceded him, people like Shem, Chanoch (Hanoch), or Ever.³⁶ Washing idolatrous dust from the feet of strangers is just not compatible with these Kabbalistic heights.

But Abraham was aware of the sacrifice that he was making. “God has enough angels in the heavens,” Abraham reasoned. “What good am I as Angel Number One-million-and-one, leaving the rest of the world in need and despair? God created me as a human to engage with this world, not to remove myself from it.”³⁷ And despite this sacrifice, it was Abraham who became the forefather of the Jewish People—not the holy Shem, Chanoch, or Ever.

This is Abraham's legacy to us. Giving is holy.

33 Deuteronomy 34:6: “And He buried him (Moses) in the valley.”

34 *Maharal, Netiv Hachessed*, chap. 1. The *Maharal* explains why other qualities of God that are mentioned in the Torah are not included in this commandment.

35 Genesis 18:19, where God says that He knows that Abraham will command also future generations to walk in the way of God.

36 Despite this, the oldest Kabbalistic work extant is a work written by Abraham called *Sefer Hayetzirah* (The Book of Formation).

37 *Chatam Sofer, Pitutchei Chotam*, found in his introduction to *Responsa*, p. i.