‘‘*Lech lecha*: Was Abraham really the first paragon of hospitality?”

by Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

Abraham’s acts of warm hospitality are regarded as the hallmark attribute of his offspring, the Jewish people; and his plea to the three nomadic strangers to turn in to his home to eat and refresh themselves (Gen. chap. 18) is hailed as the classical example of his love of humankind. The Midrash describes his tent as *mefulash,* one that had openings front and back, so he wouldn’t miss a traveller and the opportunity to perform that mitzvah.

But there is a problem here, for one of Abraham’s monotheistic contemporaries seems to have pre-empted him as pioneer of *hachnasat orchim*, the offering of hospitality!

Our sidrah relates how Abraham, together with five allied tribes, had just been embroiled in a bitter battle against a coalition of four Mesopotamian rulers of city-states (Gen. 14:1-16). While wearily wending his way home, and entering into the area of Salem, he is greeted by Melchizedek, described as, ‘king of Salem, and priest of the Most High’ (Genesis 14:18). The latter appears with refreshments of bread and wine and bestows on Abraham a warm blessing and a thanksgiving to God for having protected him and granted him victory.

So, surely, Melchizedek deserves to be accredited with having been the first in the Torah to demonstrate sensitivity in the performance of that mitzvah!

We should perhaps mention that the later Hebrew term, *hachnasat orchim*, referred to above, does not refer to a cosy dinner party with one’s friends, family, or acquaintances! It makes specific mention of welcoming in *orchim*, ‘wayfarers’— which was precisely what Abraham

was on that occasion. Indeed, it may even be suggested that Melchizedek's act of kindness to Abraham was the example and inspiration that motivated the latter to do likewise. Why then is it that Abraham, rather than Melchizedek, is held up as the paragon, the embodiment of the virtue of hospitality?

The answer to this will become apparent through a comparison between their respective acts. Significantly, Melchizedek does not invite Abraham into to his home. He 'brings out bread—*hotzi lechem* (a phrase reminiscent of the later rabbinic blessing over bread: *hamotzi lechem*)—and wine.'

Melchizedek also believed in the one God, and had established a cult of which he was the (self-proclaimed?) priest. We may speculate that his was a select and closed fraternity which regarded outsiders as a source of impurity, especially if they were warriors who had not yet undergone purification after having shed blood. This may well account for the fact that Melchizedek makes sure that Abraham stays on the road, with no invitation extended to him to enter his sacred portals in order to wash, refresh himself, and relax his exhausted limbs. Abraham, on the other hand, goes out and brings into his home—which could also be construed as a sanctuary— three strangers who, he could safely assume, were also idolators, inviting them to bathe and take a nap under the shade of the trees, after which he serves them a sumptuous meat meal. Contrast that with Melchizedek's provision of a meagre fare of bread and wine!

Furthermore, one cannot miss the sense of enthusiasm and personal involvement with which Abraham performed his acts of hospitality. Melchizedek 'brought out' bread and wine. Abraham, no sooner had he seen the men in the distance— *va-yar' va-yarotz likratam*—

'runs to meet them from the entrance of his tent' (18:2). Few men— especially of such advanced years, and more so if they had submitted themselves to circumcision but two days before, rendering them sore and weak— would have acted with such eagerness and agility.

Abraham bows before them and begs them not to pass by, but to honour him by accepting his hospitality. But, even then, he does not slow down: *Vayemaheir Avraham ha-ohelah el Sarah*, 'He *rushes* into Sarah's tent' (v.6), and excitedly gives her the news that they have visitors. So anxious is he that the wayfarers' wish to complete their journey should not prevent them from staying long enough to enjoy a meal, that he gives Sarah a rather curt instruction – *mahariy*, 'hurry'- get baking! But she does not take exception. One can sense the excitement and feverish activity building up as Abraham positively 'races' out of Sarah's tent – *V'el ha-bakar* **ratz** *Avraham* – to select the best calf and deliver it to his cook to prepare (v.7). *Va-yikach chem'ah v'chalav*, and he goes off to select the dairy fare, *va-yitein lifneihem*, 'and he sets it before them.' He is entirely immersed in the performance of the mitzvah: *Vehu omeid aleihem*, '*He himself* stands by, waiting upon them while they ate' (v.8).

What a contrast between those respective ways of treating visitors. Melchizedek is not emotionally involved. He has a ritual to perform, and he goes through the motions. Abraham, on the other hand, goes through the *e*-motions! His enthusiasm leaps off the sidrah page!

Another significant point is the inappropriate nature of the 'lechayim' offered by Melchizedek. Bread and wine would hardly be relished by someone returning, hot, thirsty, and starving from war, and who had certainly not enjoyed a proper meal for days, and had

most certainly exhausted his flasks of fresh water. Melchizedek's 'challah roll' compares most unfavourably with Abraham's banquet accompanied by freshly-baked cakes (v.6).

The fact that the Torah thought this latter event worthy of mention — after all, there must have been countless other people, such as Ephron the Hittite, who blessed Abraham as 'a prince of God'— suggests that Melchizedek's act had some unique significance, and that the presentation of those particular food items was intended symbolically. We may assume that, as a priest dedicated to 'the Most High God,' he would also have sent Abraham on his way with a hamper of food and goat skins of fresh water. As a mere three verses is allocated to the episode, we have clearly been given only the core details, but we may also conclude that the bread and wine is intrinsically connected to the blessing that he conferred on Abraham. Bearing in mind the significance of both bread and wine in Israelite religious tradition—the former, represented by the *lechem ha-panim*, the loaves permanently exhibited on a special table in the Sanctuary and the later Temples; the latter, called *nesachim*, by the wine 'libations' that accompanied the sacrifices—the ritual nature of Melchizedek's gesture becomes clear.

This may also be inferred from the inverted phraseology of the verse: 'And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine, he being a priest (*vehu kohein*) of God the Most High.' The logical order of the verse should have been, 'And Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of God the Most High, brought out bread and wine.' The textual order before us, we suggest, is clearly intended to intrinsically connect the bringing out of the bread and wine to the fact of Melchizedek's High Priestly calling.

The Sages viewed the eating of the sacrificial meat as *ochlin mi-shulchan gavo'a*, 'sharing a meal of fellowship with the Almighty,' with the bread and wine as its symbolic accompaniments. And it is in this symbolic sense that we understand Melchizedek's act. He was effectively inviting Abraham to join him in a thanksgiving offering to God for 'having delivered your enemies into your hand' (v. 20). The religious symbolism of the gift is reinforced by the continuation: *Va-yitein lo ma'aseir mi-kol,* 'And he (Abraham) gave him a tithe of all.' The latter act was a symbolic recognition of Melchizedek's status as 'priest of the Most High.' Foreshadowing the future tithes to be bestowed on the priests of the Sanctuary and the Temples, Abraham gives him a tenth (*ma'aseir*) of all the booty he had taken in the battle as a token of thanksgiving. That recognition established Melchizedek's status as monotheism's pre-priestly High Priest, an accolade confirmed by the psalmist who refers to him as the symbol of Israel's eternal priesthood (See Psalm 110:4).

Thus, Melchizedek's fare was purely ritualistic. Even if he did send Abraham on his way with adequate provisions, it was no more than any kind-hearted person would do for a friend or acquaintance. Abraham, on the other hand, taught the world the true meaning of hospitality and *chesed*, extending it, not just to fellow believers, as Melchizedek had done, but to people of every stripe, changing thereby their lives, their outlook and their faith.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Jeffrey