

Vayera 5782  
Welcoming Presence, or When is Kugel Just Kugel?  
Rabbi Betsy Forester

At the beginning of our Torah reading today, God makes a sick call to our freshly circumcised Patriarch, Avraham, as he sits at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. As soon as God appears to him, Avraham looks up, or, it would seem, out, and sees that three men have come and are standing near him. Immediately, he runs to greet them, bows to the ground, and says, "*Adonai, Im na matzati chen b'einechah, al nah ta'avor mei-al avdecha.*" Our translation renders these words to mean: "My Lords, if it please you, do not go on past your servant" (Gen. 18:3). Then, as we know, Avraham proceeds to host the three men grandly, and as it turns out, they are not men, but angels, come to announce that the aged, barren Sarah will bear a son.

The translation of verse 3, "*Adonai, Im na matzati chen b'einechah, al nah ta'avor mei-al avdecha*" which I read in English as "My Lords, if it please you, do not go on past your servant," is tricky, because Avraham begins with "*Adonai*," raising the the question of whether Avraham is addressing God—*Adonai*—or the three men, or perhaps one of those three. Rashi offers two different readings: One practical and the other spiritual.

Based on the context, Rashi says, Avraham may be speaking to the visitors, presumably addressing their leader, whom Rashi imagines to be the tallest of the three. "Adon" means "sir," and changing one vowel makes the word "Adoni," "My sir." On the other hand, Rashi says, maybe Avraham is addressing God, asking God to stay and not move on, while Avraham tends to the human visitors.

Most of our sages find in this scene not only the *mitzvah* of *hachnasat orchim*, welcoming guests, but also an emphatic message that welcoming guests supersedes welcoming the Divine Presence. Given a choice between God and random strangers, the strangers come first.

But not all of our sages agree that that is what the text is trying to say, and I agree with one in particular, the Chasidic master known as the *Ma'or Einayim*\*, who objects to the binary distinction between God's presence and the strangers' presence. God's presence permeates the boundaries of human interactions, he says, God is everywhere, and there is no reason to assume that when Avraham turns to his guests, God is disregarded.

What, then, is God doing during the encounter with the three men? Is God simply waiting? No. In this line of thinking, God is manifest in the mitzvah of welcoming the guests. God's presence gives life to the encounter and makes it meaningful.

What, exactly, then, does Avraham mean when he says, *Adonai*, if you please, do not pass by your servant?" That God should stay present, or that the men should become his guests? The answer, of course, is "both." Avraham is asking for God's presence, within the encounter itself.

Now, he, and we, move from a textual problem to a consciousness problem. (This d'var, by the way, has a title—they all do—and this one is called "Welcoming Presence, or When is Kugel Just Kugel?" We have just established that God's presence animates Avraham's encounter with his guests. Now, we will explore what it means for us to draw on that presence when we perform a *mitzvah* that is found on the other side of the coin. So this part of my d'var is called "When is Kugel Just Kugel?"

*Hachnassat orchim* is the mitzvah of bringing guests into our home. The other side of that coin is the mitzvah of *Nichum Aveilim*, comforting mourners, which is what we do when we go into someone *else's* home and *become their host*, offering our presence and caring for their physical and emotional needs during the week following the burial of their primary relative.

One of the ways Ashkenazi Jews show that we care is by bringing kugel. Now, much has been written about kugel, and also gefilte fish. Both are sweet, but kugel, that warm mix of starchy and creamy, is the quintessential comfort food. And it is meant to be savored. It is meant to call attention to itself. Anyone who has ever attended a shiva where there is kugel know that it *does* call attention to itself. It puts us at ease. And with kugel and a bit of fruit on our plate, we know how we're supposed to act—like people who are enjoying some kugel together. Nothing wrong with that.

Except that maybe that's not what we came to do.

By now I hope you are aware that our kahal is embarking on a new learning initiative that will affect all of us when we mourn and when we offer comfort during Shiva. Tomorrow will be our first learning event. Today, I hope to create a bit of Torah context for what we will learn from Daniel Goldman, who will address us from his professional and personal perspective.

There is a concept called "*Tzavta*" which means that when we perform a mitzvah, we open a channel for God's presence to unify with our internal being and animate, or give

vitality to, the *mitzvah* we are doing. Nowhere is this more true and needed than when the *mitzvah* itself is first and foremost about offering our presence to a person in need. In our Torah narrative, says the Maor Einayim, what really happens to Avraham is the following: He is in the midst of a profound moment of God-consciousness, when the opportunity to do the *mitzvah* of *hachnasat orchim* arises. So he says to God, “Please, let this not be an empty act. Be with me so that my service to these people will be whole and alive, so that they will not only be washed and fed, but *hosted*.”

We host with presence. That’s what hosting means.

In the case of kugel, if it’s Kugel proudly present as itself—when Kugel is just Kugel, we’re in a kugel moment.

The Ma’or Einayim says something profound, I think. He says that it truly is difficult to bring our full presence—meaning, our full, inspired *intention* and our full *attention* to the *mitzvah* we are doing. That is why Avraham has to ask God, “Please, stay with me. I need your presence to give me the presence I need so I can *host* these men and not just feed them.” The *mitzvah* of welcoming guests is great, however you get it done, he says, but this little bit of Torah comes to teach us that we can do better. It comes to show that **the most important thing we can bring is ourselves**. How much more is that true at a time of grief and mourning.

Picture yourself making a shiva call in the evening. We invite God’s presence in as we *daven*. It works on us, and when we get to Kaddish at the end, hearts open. We are really there for the mourners when we respond, “*Y’hei shmei rabbah min shemaya*.” Then, maybe some words are shared in memory of the person just buried. And then...well, we need help then. Because that is the moment we came for—the moment when we are most needed, when the hearts of the bereaved are wide open. How do we hold onto that sacred presence so that we can really be present to the *mitzvah* we came to do—which is not to become guests at that moment, but to become hosts in a most delicate, profound, and difficult way, to invite whatever may come up—be it silence, stories, tears, or laughter? **This is where we need help—to get to a place where we can be there with our presence, whether or not there is kugel.**

Why? Why should we go to the effort of changing a communal practice we already do with so much love and care? Here is why: We verbalize the *mitzvah* we came to do at every Shiva home, each time, when we say: *HaMakom y’nachem etchem b’toch sh’ar availei Tziyon viY’rushalim*.” May the place of God’s presence comfort you, among the People of Israel, in a distinctly Jewish way. We are the ones who bring that presence to

those who mourn. What would it take for us to instantiate the words we say, to make them manifest in what we do?

In the Torah, it's not guests versus God. At a *Shiva*, it's not kugel versus giving our full presence to the mourners. It can be both. There is a way to blend the two—a way that feels loving and affirms who *we* are as a heimish, caring community—and as a community that is not afraid to do hard things because we love to learn, and mostly because we love.

In the Torah story, *we* know that the men who come to visit Avraham are really angels. *He* sees *men*, but *we* know they come with something beyond the familiar. Therein lies our call—to be more than what is familiar, to do the work of angels, through our very human faces that don't turn away, and our human hands that reach out with a loving touch, and that provide nourishment so those who grieve don't feel that they have to host or even turn on the stove. Those who mourn are already disoriented when *we* come to visit. There is a receptivity on their end for a different way to be together than the familiar routine. It's on us to respond to their frequency. We need more tools than the kugel *schmooze* alone so that *we* can give life to the *mitzvah* of *Nichum Aveilim*, comforting mourners.

Tomorrow we will begin to learn, together, about the needs of mourners and what *Shiva* is designed to do, so that *we* can understand better why *we* might want to take something *we* already do well and make it more helpful to the people *we* come to serve. *We* will learn much that *our* hearts have already learned, if *we* have lost loved ones, but this time with a new sense of possibility. After tomorrow, there will be two more Sunday morning sessions, one in November and one in December. All will be available online and recorded. I urge you to participate in all three, as *we* learn with and from one another and, together, as the caring community *we* are, nurture practices that draw us even closer to the Divine within and between us.

May that be God's will, and may it be ours.

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\*The Ma'or Einayim is Rebbe Menachem Twersky of Chernobl. He lived in the 18th century and pioneered the Hasidic movement, founding the CHernobyl Hasidic dynasty and writing some of the first major Hasidic works.