

NOVEMBER 14, 2016

Parashat Vayera

The Power of the Personal

When he saw them he ran to meet them (Genesis 18:2)

וירא וירץ לקראתם (בראשית יח:ב)

Last month, the Israeli website NRG [described a growing phenomenon](#) of board game nights in Israel. In the era of Xbox, Facebook and cellphones, young Israelis travel from across the country to a hall in Tel Aviv to sit around tables and play board games. When asked why he participates in these game nights, engineering student Yair Libman explained that he looks forward to the game nights because, “These evenings are for me a symbol of something that has almost been lost from the world: a face-to-face interaction with people, not via a screen...”

The Sages would describe Abraham as an “influencer.” He had the power to bring the messages of faith and spirituality to a polytheistic world devoid of belief. He changed the world by changing lives, one at a time. When the text relates that Abraham left Haran on their way to Canaan with the “the souls that they had gotten in Haran,” the Midrash (Midrash Rabbah 39) explains that this refers not to their children—for they had none, but to their followers. “Abraham would convert the men, while Sarah converted the women, and for this reason the verse alludes to them as if they had ‘made’ them.” How did they do it? What was their formula to affect others? In the beginning of our parashah, we learn Abraham’s secret—and it’s really not much of a secret at all. Abraham, perhaps more than any other biblical figure, recognized the power of the personal.

Abraham personally demonstrates the ultimate performance of the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim*—welcoming guests. Seeing three travelers crossing by his home, Abraham runs to greet his guests, welcomes them inside, offers them water to wash and shade to rest, as he rushes to prepare for them a grand meal including bread, butter and fresh meat. Rabbi Israel Meir Hakohen Kagan, known as the Chafetz Chaim, wrote an entire book on performing acts of kindness called *Ahavat Chesed*. Commenting on the story of Abraham and his guests, he notes that the biblical text goes to unusual lengths to meticulously describe Abraham’s extended efforts to accommodate his visitors. Rabbi Kagan writes, (*Ahavat Chesed* Section 3 Chapter 2) “From this we learn that the intention of the Torah is to teach us to learn from our forefather Abraham the elder, how to act with our guests.” We clearly see from the text the emphasis that Abraham placed on the personal connection with perfect strangers. Rather than sending servants to tend to his guests, he served them himself, taking interest not only in their physical needs, but their spiritual well-being as well. Abraham understood intuitively that if we want to influence and affect others for the better, the best and most effective way to do it is by establishing a personal connection. When people feel that we care about them and are genuinely interested in their well-being, they will reciprocate that personal interest by taking interest in what is important to us as well. Abraham effected change not because he wanted to promote an agenda. When others felt a personal connection to him, they instinctively took interest in the issues and values he considered important.

The power of the personal also represents a core element of the strong support that Israel enjoys from our elected representatives. Many people don’t realize that since President Obama was elected in 2008, more than 70 percent of Congress has changed. Last week’s election saw the introduction of at least 6 new senators and at least 55 new House members who will be sworn into Congress early next year. While letters and emails to our members of Congress are important, ultimately the greatest support stems from personal relationships that supporters of Israel develop, nurture and foster with our elected representatives. When we take genuine interest in elected representatives who share our ideals and offer them support and assistance, they take a genuine interest in the issues important to us as well. How many of us have ever called our member of Congress? How many of us have met with an elected representative when

they're back from Washington in their local office? Have we ever visited our elected representative's office during a trip to DC? Elected officials really do listen to passionate constituents willing to make the effort to discuss an issue in person. It may not be easy, and it may take effort and time, but Abraham reminds us that there's no more powerful way to effect change in the world than the power of the personal. ■

Our Eternal, Historical Capital

Go to the land of Moriah (Genesis 22:2)
(כב:ב)

לך לך אל ארץ מוריה (בראשית)

After the United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (UNESCO) panel approved its infamous draft resolution ignoring Jewish and Christian ties to the Temple Mount and which denies the historical connection of the Jewish people to Jerusalem, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu [criticized the troubling resolution](#) saying “The theatre of the absurd continues with UNESCO and today the organization has made its most bizarre decision by saying the people of Israel have no connection to the Temple Mount and the Western Wall...Obviously they have never read the Bible.” [According to Daniel Pipes](#), an American historian, writer, commentator, and president of the Middle East Forum, “Jerusalem appears in the Jewish Bible 669 times and Zion (which usually means Jerusalem) 154 times, or 823 times in all.” Perhaps the earliest explicit reference to Jerusalem appears in Parashat Vayeira.

In the compelling and difficult story of the “Binding of Isaac” (*Akeidat Yitzchak*) Abraham is commanded to “Take now your son...and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell you.” (22:2) Commenting on the name Moriah, Rashi explains that this too refers to Jerusalem. In Chronicles (II, 3) we are instructed, “To build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah. Our rabbis explained [that Jerusalem is called Moriah] because from there an instruction (from the Hebrew term *hora'ah*—to teach) went forth from Israel.” In other words, the Sages associated the term Moriah with the fact that the Temple Mount would one day serve as the seat of the Sanhedrin, the great body of rabbinical sages that taught and guided the nation for centuries during the Second Temple Era. According to this understanding, the bible refers to Jerusalem (Moriah) as a place of teaching to allude to its future as a center of Jewish law and teaching.

In addition to the more than 800 mentions of Jerusalem in the Hebrew Bible, rabbinic literature is replete with literally thousands of references to the city. International efforts to erase this rich, deep Jewish connection to our Holy City must reinforce our resolve to maintain and uphold our eternal bond with the city about which King David wrote, “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.” (Psalms 137)

Following its war of independence in 1948, the centuries-old Jewish dream of reclaiming Jerusalem was partially realized, when the western half of the city was made the capital of a re-established Israel. The city was reunited during the Six-Day War of 1967, when Israel won a stunning victory over several Arab nations that again forced the Jewish state to fight for its survival. Israel immediately abolished restrictions on access to the city, allowing all Jews, Christians *and* Muslims to worship at their holy places. Today, there is an overwhelming consensus among Israelis, Jews around the world and millions of Christians that Jerusalem must remain the capital of Israel forever. [A 1980 Israeli law states that Jerusalem is the state's](#) “eternal, undivided” capital, and that sentiment has been reaffirmed by Israeli governments on both the left and right of the political spectrum. Here in the United States, Congress has also weighed in on behalf of that position. A series of resolutions, passed with overwhelming bipartisan support have stated that Jerusalem “must remain an undivided city in which the rights of every ethnic and religious group are protected.”

The strongest response America can send to those trying to erase the Jewish connection to Jerusalem is to fully understand the central role this city has made in the lives of Jews throughout the world for more than three millennia. We must continue to remind our elected officials of the unbreakable connection to the Holy City of Jerusalem and remind them that Jerusalem must always be the undivided capital of Israel. ■

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