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Parshat Vayera: Actualizing Loyalty Rabbi Marianne Novak Class of 2019

How would you show your loyalty and commitment to God and Judaism? Would you start praying? Would you start learning Torah? Are there other mitzvot that you would perform with greater care and seriousness? And if so, which ones and why?

When our Parsha opens we find 100 year old Avraham living in Elonei Mamre. He has received repeated promises from God and made a covenant with Him. Avraham had recently followed God's command to circumcise himself and all the males of his household. God then, appears to him or visits him as he recovers from his self- circumcision. The *Chachamim* derive the mitzvah of visiting the sick, *bikkur cholim*, from God's action here. But Avraham doesn't behave as someone who had just undergone (by his own hand mind you) major surgery. When God arrives, Avraham, instead of recuperating in his sick bed, is found at the opening of his tent during the hottest part of the day in a desert climate. And what is Avraham doing here? He's looking for guests! And lo and behold, strangers arrive. He runs to greet them and then says the following interesting statement:

ויאמר אדני אמ-נא מצאתי חן בעיניך אל-נא תעבר מעל עבדך
He said, "My lords, if it please you, do not go on past your servant.

The English translation here (JPS) of the word אדני is in the plural, 'my lords' implying that Avraham used a respectful honorific to the strangers. Rashi, however, bringing the tradition from Bereisheet Rabah, provides a different reading.

ד"א קדוש הוא, ויהיה אמר, להקב"ה, להמתין לו עד שירויץ ויכניס את האורחים-
Another explanation is that the word is "holy" (referring to God): [Avraham] asked God to wait for him until he ran and invited in the guests.

Why was Avraham asking God to wait and for what purpose? Let's set the scene again. God personally appears to Avraham to comfort him after his *Brit milah*. And Avraham, instead of staying to receive God, tells God to wait and runs out of his tent to busily attend to strangers. To put it into modern terms, it would be as if God was visiting me in the intensive care unit and I told Him to hold on a minute as I must run out of my hospital bed and make sure some strangers that I saw wandering in the halls have some food to eat.

The situation with Avraham, therefore, is somewhat odd. *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* is in his presence, yet Avraham attends to people he has never met. Given the interactions God has had with human beings up until this point—interactions that have in one way or another have gone quite poorly- one may wonder how God views Avraham at this point. God's close interaction with Adam and Chava didn't end well. And while God's involvement with Noach begins very auspiciously and results in a covenant for the world, it ends on a sour note with Noach's drunken behavior and conflict with his sons. And in Avraham's case the question is even more pointed since God has chosen Avraham and has made a covenant with him and his offspring for eternity. While Avraham has shown loyalty to God by obeying the direct commandment of *brit milah*, here Avraham's actions are not so clear cut. Avraham asks God to watch him as he literally runs around getting provisions for these strangers and the narrative employs verbs to show Avraham's care and urgency-

וירץ - *Vayaratz* - and he *ran* to greet them
וימהר - *Va y'maher* he *hastened* to the tent

So what is God seeing here? Perhaps, Avraham is showing that he truly understands God's purpose for him on earth, a purpose that goes beyond building altars to show thanks and even beyond telling people about the one God. Perhaps, when Avraham bends over backwards to serve these travellers, God sees that Avraham truly embodies the command for him to be blameless, והיה תמים. When Avraham shows kindness to not only people he doesn't know but also when it truly makes no rational sense to do so (he is post-surgery after all), he shows his greatest loyalty to God. Avraham understands that although the norm at the time was quite the opposite (as we see in the characterization of Sodom and Amorrhah) to be God-like is to treat human beings with respect and kindness. God looks at Avraham here and is reassured that in choosing Avraham, He has chosen the right person who within partnership, within *brit*, will fulfill God's mission to infuse the world with His truth, justice and kindness. God immediately rewards him by having these very strangers be His messengers and announce to Avraham again that Sarah will bear him a son.

Additionally, the Rabbis further add to the importance of Avraham's behavior by incorporating his actions under the mitzvah of *Hachnassat Orchim*, the commandment of escorting and seeing to guests. In doing so, the Rabbis make sure this way of showing faith in God was not just a one-time occurrence.

So let's return to our initial questions. How would you show loyalty to God? Perhaps you would show your thanks, gratitude and ultimate belief in God by praying or, as Avraham did, building a few altars. You might learn Torah and then teach it to others as Avraham did by publicizing the idea of God is one. You might also be more careful with certain mitzvot, such as Kashrut or Shabbat. Avraham's example here, however, gives us another path. He shows us that one of the greatest ways to show one's loyalty to God is by serving other people, especially when it makes no real sense to do so.

Avraham's behavior is a reminder to us that when we fulfill those mitzvot of *bikkur cholim*, visiting the sick, *hachnassat orchim*, taking care of guests, or any other of the mitzvot of *Gemilut Chasadim*, acts of loving kindness, we are not only doing something nice for someone else and following God's commandment, but we are showing in our actions the highest form of loyalty and faith in God. It is in this way that we can show our submission to God's will and join with Him to make this world Holy, right, just and kind.



Rabbi Marianne Novak received her BA in Political Science from Barnard College and her JD from Washington University School of Law in St. Louis. She has served as the Endowment Director at the Jewish Federation of St. Louis and also helped start the Women's Tefillah Group at Bais Abraham. Marianne then moved to Skokie, Illinois, became a Gabbait for the Skokie Women's Tefillah Group, and taught Bat Mitzvah students. Marianne is an instructor and curriculum developer for the Florence Melton Adult School of Jewish Learning and taught Tanakh at Rochelle Zelle Jewish High School. She has lectured for many Jewish organizations and synagogues, and writes a blog for the Times of Israel. Marianne lives in Skokie with her husband Noam Stadlan and family.