

ABRAHAM'S HOSPITALITY

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Genesis 18 commences with a description of Abraham's act of warm hospitality, as he welcomes three unknown travelers into his camp to eat and refresh themselves. This episode of hospitality is regarded as a hallmark value of Jewish tradition, as well as another example of Abraham's character, namely his love and concern for human beings.

This is not the only description of hospitality. Genesis 14:18 depicts Melchizedek, King of Salem and priest of the Most High, as he comes forth with bread and wine to greet and bless Abraham as he returns from the battle against the four kings. This act of kindness seems to represent an earlier example of the principle of hospitality to wayfarers. Indeed, it has been suggested that this act of kindness to Abraham was the model and inspiration that motivated the latter to behave likewise. If so, one might wonder why it is that Abraham, rather than Melchizedek, is held up as the embodiment of the virtue of hospitality.

The larger question is not who deserves to be the paragon of hospitality, but rather the symbolism of bread and wine in the meals that both men serve to their guests. If we compare their respective acts of hospitality, we will note significant differences. Melchizedek does not invite Abraham into his home. He brings the bread and wine out to him. Melchizedek clearly also was a believer in the One God, and apparently had set up a religion 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 have been why Melchizedek makes sure that Abraham remains on the road, with no invitation extended for him to enter his host's sacred portals to wash and refresh himself and to rest his weary body. Abraham, on the other hand, went out and brought the three men into his abode, extending to them a full and warm hospitality, including the opportunity to bathe and to take a nap under the shade of the trees.

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Secondly, one cannot miss the sense of excitement, privilege, and personal involvement, which pervaded Abraham's act of hospitality. No sooner had Abraham seen the travelers on the horizon when he *va-yar' va-yarotz likra-tam* [ran to meet them] from the entrance of his tent. Abraham was an aged man at this time. Few men of greatly advanced years, especially after having performed circumcision on themselves but two days earlier, would have acted with such agility.

Abraham, moreover, bowed before them and begged them not to pass by, but to honor him by accepting his hospitality. Even then he did not slow down: *Vayemaher Avraham ha-ohelah el Sarah* [He rushed into Sarah's tent] and excitedly gave her the good news that they have visitors. So anxious is he that the wayfarers' inevitable wish to continue their journey should not prevent them from staying long enough to enjoy a meal that he gives Sarah a rather curt instruction – *'mahari* [hurry]' - get to the baking! She does not take exception to his request. One can sense an atmosphere of excitement and activity building up. Abraham "races" out of Sarah's tent – *V'el ha-bakar ratz Avraham* [And Abraham ran to the herd] – to select the best calf and deliver it to his cook to prepare. Then he selects the dairy fare: *Va-yikah hem'ah v'halav* [And he took curds and milk]. He himself *va-yiten lifnehem* [sets it before them], and does not delegate the task to a servant. *Vehu omed alehem* [He himself stood by], and he himself waits upon them while they eat.

Consider the difference between the two respective acts. Melchizedek is generous but not emotionally involved. He has a ritual to perform, and he goes through the motions. Abraham, in contrast, goes through the "emotions"! The opportunity to offer hospitality is positively exciting, and his enthusiasm appears to leap out of the text of the Torah.

Note, also, the contrast between the food that is presented. Melchizedek offers bread and wine, which seems a strange form of refreshment. For people who travel through the desert it is not wine, but an abundance of water that is required – which is precisely what Abraham later provides for Hagar and Ishmael before they leave for their long journey. Bread and wine will hardly be relished by someone who is returning from war, who has probably not enjoyed a proper meal for some time, nor had access to sources of fresh water. Compare, then, Melchizedek's meager and inappropriate fare with Abraham's banquet of freshly-baked cakes, of the most tender cuts of meat

from a calf that he had personally selected, and all this accompanied by milk and curd. Melchizedek's repast was barely a finger snack. Abraham's was a banquet.

In Christian theology, Melchizedek, a priest-king, is regarded as a savior, an inspiration for the founder of that faith. The fact that he served bread and wine, which later became part of the basic ritual of Christianity (albeit reinterpreted), suggests that the offering of a gift to Abraham was intended more as a religious ritual, symbolic food, than a meal to be relished. According to this reading of the passage, Melchizedek's primary purpose in coming out to meet Abraham was to bless a fellow worshipper of the One God and to offer him the bread and wine merely as a token of religious fellowship, not as a demonstration of hospitality. This may be inferred from the inverted phraseology of the verse: *And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine, being a priest [vehu kohen] of God the Most High (14:18)*. The logical form of the verse would have been, 'And Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of God the Most High, brought out bread and wine.' The textual order before us is clearly intended to connect syntactically the bringing out of the bread and wine with the fact of Melchizedek's priestly calling.

The symbolic significance of bread and wine within the cultic context of the Sanctuary and the Temple is clear from the Torah's various prescriptions regarding the *lehem ha-panim*, the 12 bread loaves that were ritually exhibited (Lev. 24:5-19) and the libations of wine that were poured out as an accompaniment to the sacrifices (Ex. 29:40; Lev. 23:13; Num. 28:14, et al).

For a reference to the more specific identification of bread and wine as symbolic of a priestly function, and for their presentation to an initiate as a token of installation into high priestly office, we are reliant upon the Apocalyptic literature, and to a passage in The Testament of Levi which is powerfully reminiscent of the Melchizedek episode. Levi, son of Jacob, arrives at Bethel, where, like his father before him, he has a vision in which he is initiated into the role of high priest for his father and clan:

There I again saw the vision as formerly, after we had been there seventy days. And I saw seven men in white clothing who were saying to me, "Arise, put on the vestments of the priesthood, the crown of righteousness, the oracle of understanding, the robe of truth, the breastplate of faith, the mitre for the head and the apron

for prophetic power." Each carried one of these and put them on me and said, "From now on be priest, you and all your posterity." The first anointed me with holy oil and gave me a staff. The second washed me with pure water, and fed me by hand with bread and holy wine.¹

Viewed against this backcloth, the act of Melchizedek must be construed as an act of sacerdotal symbolism. Through the power of the symbolic food which he presented to Abraham, he may have been essentially conferring upon him equal spiritual status with himself. That Abraham passively accepted this patronizing gesture, and even went so far as to render in return a tithe to Melchizedek, is both a further testimony to Abraham's humility and a measure of the respect he had for the piety and spirituality that he recognized in Melchizedek. The latter's spiritual status must have been enshrined in early Judaism's oral tradition, as confirmed much later by the psalmist who refers to Melchizedek as the symbol of Israel's eternal priesthood (Ps. 110:4). Eating bread is well attested as a celebration of the ratification of a spiritual covenant or initiation into religious fellowship. Hence the conversion of Jethro, represented by his formal and public confession that *God is greater than all the other gods*' (Ex. 18:11), is immediately followed by a ritual *eating of bread before God* in the presence of Aaron and all the elders of Israel (v. 12). The meal symbolizes fraternity; and, by association, the word *lehem* [bread] assimilated the meaning of "kith and kin" as in the phrase *Lahm'kha yasimu mazor tahtekha* [Your own kith and kin lay a snare for your feet].²

We do not credit the offering of the wine that accompanied the bread with any independent symbolic significance, such as was developed in Christianity, although one may be tempted to suggest that the red liquid did conjure up the idea of a blood covenant, such as we encounter in Exodus 24:6-9. The wine may thus have served to reinforce the idea of eternal (spiritual) kinship.

Thus, Melchizedek's offering of meager but symbolically charged fare should not be contrasted poorly with that of Abraham. The former, for the reason we have suggested, felt unable at that point to welcome Abraham into his precinct and offer him full hospitality. The priority for him was to welcome Abraham into a status of spiritual eminence and fraternity.

It was Abraham, then, and not Melchizedek, who was justly acclaimed for his hospitality to wayfarers. Melchizedek, unlike Abraham, was not function-

ing as a host. His food was intended to serve a totally different objective. Both men reacted to a similar situation as they saw fit, Abraham as a hospitable host, and Melchizedek as a conscientious priest.

NOTES

1. Testament of Levi, Ch. 8. See James H Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament: Pseudepigrapha* (New York: Doubleday, 1983) vol. 1, p. 791.
2. Obadiah 1:7, following the rendering of the New English Bible. Similarly, in Psalm 41:10, *okhel lahmi* [he that eats my bread] is paralleled by *ish shelomi* [the man at one with me].



עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

2006

July	I Chronicles II Chronicles	14 - 29 1 - 11
August	II Chronicles	12 - 36

STARTING WITH THE MONTH OF SEPTEMBER WE BEGIN A NEW CYCLE OF THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE CALENDAR

September	Genesis	1 - 22
October	Genesis	23 - 50
November	Exodus	1 - 24