

## Welcoming the Other

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The person of Abraham/Ibrahim is an archetype in the religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and the different traditions that have flowed from them – an archetype both of faith and hospitality – of welcoming the other.

In the Biblical narrative (Genesis 18:1) we are told of how Abraham was sitting at “the opening of his tent in the heat of the day”. Indeed, Jewish tradition describes Abraham’s tent as having its flaps raised on all four sides during the day, so that wayfarers from all directions would be able to receive his hospitality. Based on the immediate preceding passage in the book of Genesis which tells of how Abraham, together with his son Ishmael and his whole household, had just undergone the rite of circumcision as an expression of the Covenant with God; Jewish tradition understands that Abraham was at this time recuperating from the operation. Moreover as the verse indicates “it was in the heat of the day” - the Middle East sun was bearing down in full force. Yet, “he lifts up his eyes and sees three men before him” and, despite everything, “he ran from the tent opening to meet them and bowed before them”, inviting them to come into his tent for refreshment and sustenance.

Abraham does not ask them of their origin, whether they are friend or foe; he does not firstly make enquiries of their purpose, their intentions, their loyalties, their ideologies. His intent is simply to welcome them and provide hospitality.

We learn from the narrative that these are not just “men”, not just “travelers”; they are “angels”, “Divine messengers” who have their Heavenly appointed tasks. They have come first and foremost to give Abraham and Sarah the promise of the birth of Isaac a year later. But two of these messengers go on to Sodom to warn of the pending consequences of evil that has so saturated the city and environs that it will bring about its destruction ; and they go to deliver Lot, Abraham’s nephew, from these consequences.

And chapter 19 of Genesis opens with the words “and the two angels came to Sodom in the evening and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom”; and he, similarly, arises to offer them hospitality.

However here they are identified in the text as “angels”, whereas in the previous chapter with Abraham, they are just referred to as “men”. Why? Why are they identified to Lot as “angels”, but to Abraham - someone of such great significance - only as just “men”? One of the great Hasidic master explained, “the reason is because there was no need to identify them to Abraham as “angels”, because Abraham saw the angel in every person”. Abraham saw the Divine Image in every human being.

This is the secret of truly welcoming the other in the deepest sense. It is in the recognition that the Divine is in every human being; or in other words that we are all “children of God”. It is the recognition that human dignity - regardless of race, creed, color, or gender - is of Divine origin and inalienable.

Indeed our sages declare that receiving guests is even greater than receiving the Divine Presence itself

However hospitality is not just a concept that is valid for the individual.

Human identity is composed of circles within circles. Most of us are members of families, congregations, communities, nations, faiths or religions.

And the degree to which we feel part and parcel of wider circles, depends upon the degree to which we feel welcome there; the degree to which we feel that our dignity is respected there. Where people feel that they are at best tolerated and not truly accepted, then it will be difficult for them to feel commitment themselves to that wider society. This is accentuated in contexts of physical conflict, but is no less challenging in societies where there are dominant groups and more vulnerable groups; in lands where they have been for ages, or in lands where they are more recent arrivals.

This is why inter-faith relations - in effect inter-faith hospitality – is so important for our world. It is key to a world of respect for the dignity of the other, a world in which different communities feel welcome and feel committed to its peace and wellbeing.

Of course, when the lives of innocents are threatened, when our own communities, families and indeed our own persons are threatened; there is a fundamental moral obligation to do all we can legitimately do in order to protect and deliver from danger. This inevitably poses great moral challenges, especially in our modern world and in the face of modern warfare

But even if we do not necessarily all arrive at the same operative conclusions, the overriding question our traditions call on us to affirm is how may we most effectively and widely affirm the principle of the Divine in every human person?"

Welcoming the other therefore is not only a Divine quality and an affirmation of the Divine dignity in the other; ultimately it is a reflection of who we are ourselves.

The Abrahamic heritage affirms that those who are hospitable – those who are merciful and gracious to others - are truly descendants of Abraham.

In that sense Abraham is a universal figure whose universal spirit is embodied in this Assembly; embodied in the various different traditions represented here. It is the expression of respect for the dignity of the other; welcoming the other; the spirit and action which is critical for the good of humanity, for our world.