



**Parsha Va-yera**  
**2 Kings 4:1-37**  
**October 18, 2013 / 14 Cheshvan 5774**

A first-time visitor to a private home in Israel might not know how to respond to the somewhat unexpected first words a host may utter: "Kar o Cham" (hot or cold)?

What is the host asking? They want to know whether the drink that they will assuredly be providing should be a hot drink or a cold drink. In the somewhat typical - and, yes, somewhat aggressive - Israeli fashion, the absolute assumption is made that the visitor will accept the offer of hospitality. Thus, the first greeting/question seeks to ascertain what, exactly, the visitor will be having.

Let's contrast this greeting with what is a more typical conversation here in the United States. More often than not, a host here asks, "Can I get you something?" The "polite" answer, of course is to refuse with some version of "Nothing, I'm fine... Really." The results of this all-to-frequent refusal are two-fold. First, the guests - even if they truly are hungry or thirsty - do not have their needs met; we are conditioned not to ask. And, the host, again by this misguided convention of "politeness," is denied the opportunity to show hospitality at the beginning of a visit, that very moment when we want to make a good impression.

On the surface, one might ascribe this variation in our cultures to simple differences in our respective weather patterns. A hotter climate in the Middle East, indeed, has produced a populace more accustomed to drinking (and eating) on a regular basis throughout the day, especially when coming to a place of rest. But, I suggest that it is more than that. I think that the level of hospitality in Israel comes from a culture where hospitality - for both the giver and receiver - has a higher value, something worth emulating. The "polite" refusal that we Americans typically offer would be taken as standoffishness by an Israeli; to refuse to be served is to insult the host. And not to offer something to a visitor - that would be unheard of!

The Torah portion, Vayera, includes the famous story of Abraham extending hospitality - bringing the choicest of flour and meat - to his three unexpected visitors. We see a similar story in the Haftarah. The Prophet Elisha regularly visited the town of Shunem, in today's Lower Galilee. On each visit he is invited in by a wealthy woman, le'echol lechem, to eat a meal. Eventually, this woman extended the hospitality to include a well-appointed room where Elisha could stay each time he passed through town. Both Abraham, in Genesis, and this Shunemite woman, in the Book of Kings, had their hospitality acknowledged with the greatest of rewards - children,

born after a period of infertility in their respective families. The Torah and the Haftarah remind the reader that simply being hospitable can lead to the greatest of rewards.

I vividly recall the first Arabic phrase that I was ever taught - "Ahalan wa sahalan," ("my tent is your tent)," a phrase of welcome and demonstration of hospitality. Israelis and their neighbors in the Middle East can teach those of us here a lesson - that hospitality, for both the giver and the receiver, can jumpstart a relationship.

By the way - my answer to "Kar o Cham" is usually "Cham te eem nanna," tea with the mint leaves found in a typical Israeli garden.

Shabbat Shalom.

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