

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [279]

For Who Would Give You Wine in the Desert! (Insights into Genesis Rabbah 49:4)



? If you see an advertisement that reads “Free Bottle of Wine,” what is your first thought? Why?

Background to Our Story

Genesis 18:1-8

¹The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. ²Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

³He said, “If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. ⁵Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant.”

“Very well,” they answered, “do as you say.”

⁶So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. “Quick,” he said, “get three seahs of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread.”

⁷Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. ⁸He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

Genesis 18:19

כִּי יִדְעֹתָיו לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא אֶת־בְּנָיו וְאֶת־בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו וְשָׁמְרוּ דְרָף יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט לְמַעַן
הִבִּיא יְהוָה עַל־אַבְרָהָם אֶת אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר עָלָיו:

"For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him." (Genesis 18:19)

The Text: Genesis Rabbah 49:4

רבי עזריה בשם רבי יהודה מתחלה צדקה לבסוף משפט. הא פיצד אברהם היה מקבל את העוברים ואת השבים, משקיו אוכלים ושותים אמר להם ברכו. אמרו לו מה נאמר, אמר להם אמרו ברוך אל עולם שאכלנו משלו, אם מקבל עליו וברוך, הוה אכיל ושתי ואזיל, ואי לא הוה מקבל עליה וברוך, הוה אמר ליה הב מה דעלך. ואמר מה אית לך עלי, הוה אמר ליה, חד קסיט דתמר בעשרה פולרין, וחד ליטרא דקופר בעשרה פולרין, וחד עגול דרפתא בעשרה פולרין. מאן יהיב לך תמרא במדברא, מאן יהיב לך קופר במדברא, מאן יהיב לך עגולא במדברא. מן דהוה תמי ההיא עקתא דהוה עקי ליה, הוה אמר ברוך אל עולם שאכלנו משלו, הדא הוא דכתיב לכתחלה צדקה ולבסוף משפט.

Rabbi Azaryah said in the name of Rabbi Yehuda: Initially, what Abraham did was righteousness, but at the end it was justice.

How is this so?

Abraham would accept passerby into his home and offer them food and drink. When they were eating and drinking, he would say to them, "Say a blessing."

They would say to him. "What should we say?"

And he [Abraham] would tell them. "Say, 'Blessed be the God of the world, from Whose food we have eaten.'"

If [the guest] accepted this upon himself and said a blessing, he would eat and drink and go on his way. But if [the guest] would not accept this upon himself and say a blessing, [Abraham] would say to him, "Give me what you owe me as payment for the food."

And [the guest] would say, "What do I owe you?"

And [Abraham] would say to him, "One container of wine costs ten follarin, and one litra of meat costs ten follarin and one roll of bread costs ten follarin. For who would give you wine in the middle of a desert,

who would give you meat in the middle of a desert, who would give you a roll in the middle of a desert?"

When [the guest] saw the difficulty that Abraham was making for him, he would say, "Blessed be the God of the world, from Whose food we have eaten."

Thus it is written: initially righteousness, and at the end, justice.



Explaining the Story - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

Bonus ? What was Abraham's minimum expectation when he offered food and drink to his guests?

? What was Abraham's agenda?

Bonus ? What was Abraham's logic when he charged for the food to those who refused to acknowledge its source?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts

! Since expectations always exist, there is no such a thing as a free lunch!



In our story, we find the shocking revelation that Abraham's kindness and generosity have strings attached. Abraham has an agenda and he does not hide it: either you acknowledge that God is the provider of the food you eat, or you pay for it. Paraphrasing Abraham, "For who would give you wine in the middle of a desert, who would give you meat in the middle of a desert, who would give you a roll in the middle of a desert?" According to the commentary to Artscroll's Genesis Rabbah, *it is possible that in demanding*

payment from those guests who would not recite a blessing, Abraham was presenting them with a philosophical argument: If they believed what Abraham told them, that the almighty God had given him the food, then they could rightfully claim that He provided it to Abraham for the express purpose of distributing it to wayfarer. In that case, while they would be obliged to bless God and thank Him for the food, they would not necessarily be obligated to pay Abraham, who acted only as a conduit. However, if they refused to accept Abraham's premise, and instead attributed their meal solely to Abraham's efforts, then there was no reason that they should not pay him for the food!

On a more commonplace level, our story reminds us of something we know it too well, that there is no such a thing as a free lunch (or free time-share, free iPhone, or free checking account). Whenever there is an expectation (and there is almost always one), there are strings attached. Sometimes the strings are visible for all to see and sometimes they are almost invisible, but they are always there. For example, as parents, we provide for our children and we hope our investment will be repaid with a sense of appreciation, menschlichkeit, and a life of wise choices.