In this week’s Torah portion, Vayeira, several important events occur that are worth pondering. The first is that Abraham is visited by three guests, whom he welcomes with the utmost care and sincere hospitality. The text reads: “Please let a little water be taken and bathe your feet and recline under a tree and I will take a morsel of bread and sustain your hearts.”

These men tell Abraham that Sarah is soon to give birth to their first son (which Sarah thinks is a joke because she is 90 years old and Abraham is 99 at this time.) Then when the guests depart for the city of Sodom, God appears to Abraham and tells him that both the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah are to be destroyed due to the wickedness of the people living there. Abraham begins to bargain with God arguing that the innocent shouldn’t be condemned to die with the wicked. He is so sophisticated at negotiating that he gets God to agree that as long as there are at least 10 innocent people in the city, he will not destroy it.

The teaching of hospitality comes up again when two angel-men appear to Lot in Sodom, to try to convince Lot to leave Sodom. Lot provides them with food and a place to rest. He also protects them from an angry mob who want to abuse the men and take their wealth. Let’s pause on these facts: These men are strangers to Lot and yet his instinct is to feed and house and literally protect them from harm. The story of Sodom ends tragically as we all know, but I gain some important teachings from the earlier parts of the story that feel relevant today.

Later in this parasha, some time after Sarah bears Isaac, G-d calls on Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as proof of his loyalty to and faith in G-d. This is such an important lesson that we read this parasha now in the book of Genesis AND also on Rosh Hashanah. As we all know, just as Abraham is about to sacrifice his child, an angel appears and tells him to sacrifice an animal instead. Abraham passes the test and little Isaac is spared.

So, a very meaty portion, right? A couple of big themes come through in this parasha for me. One is related to how we take care of others and the other is about faith and loyalty. The first question that comes to mind is why is it so important for us to be hospitable, to welcome the stranger into our space/into our homes? In the Talmud it says, “Hospitality is a great mitzvah. It is considered more important to show hospitality than to attend classes or to greet G-d in prayer.” I see that we’re shown in Vayeira role models for these vital human acts of loving-kindness, without expectation of return or reward.

In everyday, non-crisis life, think about how you feel when you go to someone’s home…do they make you feel welcome or are you an afterthought? They may not rush to wash your feet like they did in biblical times but do they offer you a drink right away and make you feel welcome in their company? It could be the difference between feeling really good and feeling like you want to get the heck out of that person’s house.

I feel fortunate to happen to know some very hospitable hosts - my sisters and best friends included -they’re always gracious when inviting others into their spaces. They are careful to plan get-togethers at their homes with delicious and plentiful food and drink, to place out the really nice dishes and silverware, and provide a pleasant and clean home environment. I also love to take care of people in my own home.

So, why do I think the concept of hospitality is so important that it needs to be mentioned twice in this parasha? I like the midrash (commentary) about it which explains that as each person possesses a spark of the divine, when we welcome others into our homes, we are in a sense welcoming G-d or honoring G-d with our actions. And, hospitality in its highest form is meant to be an ‘active’ event, looking for and awaiting the guests so as to make them feel as welcome and as comfortable as possible.

So, what about the other theme, that of faith and loyalty? As a parent, I cannot imagine the pain and angst that Abraham felt as he prepared to sacrifice his son. As parents, we want to protect our children from harm, not place them in harm’s way on purpose. I find it fascinating to know that when a woman is pregnant, there is an exchange of cells back and forth from mother to child in a sort of reciprocal manner. The nutrients from the mother nourish the fetus to allow it to grow and develop and likewise, fetal cells rush in to support tissue in the mother so that she may continue to be the best supporter for the baby. Talk about hospitality! Hmmm, maybe we need to think about mothers as the original best hosts.

In thinking again about hospitality, it occurred to me that in this terrible time of uncertainty in Israel and in the world, how important it is to be as good a hosting place for others to feel safe with-whether in our physical spaces, gathered in our prayers, and gathered with us in our communication. Maybe we should expand our idea of hospitality to include the actions we take from our hearts.

If the horrible current climate has underscored anything for me, it’s how important it is for us to be empathetic to others-to let them know we care. I feel so much better when this hospitable act of loving-kindness is extended to me. I have appreciated every one of my non-Jewish friends and acquaintances who have reached out to ask me how I’ve been doing and I’ve also noticed, sadly, the silence of those friends who have not extended a kind word to me or any words of comfort, or any words at all. And the silence has hurt.

Perhaps the tenet of loving-kindness through hospitality is so important in this portion of the Torah because like the binding of Isaac, providing hospitality is also a test of faith. Can we extend loving-kindness even in difficult times when all we want to do is withdraw and hide out in our homes, not see anyone, contract, and make ourselves smaller? Can we make the effort and still find it within our hearts to open and be kind to others even when we ourselves are hurting? When I’m struggling, I always feel better through altruism. Maybe G-d would have us live in this state of hospitality because character-building benefits the host and the guest, both.

I’d like to end with a favorite prayer by Debbie Friedman which refers to Genesis 12:1 where G-d says to Abraham, “Go forth to the land I will show you.” It has been on my mind this week with it’s beautiful message and melody: (I won’t sing it to spare you my terrible singing voice.)

L’chi Lach, to a land that I will show you

Leich l’cha, to a place you do not know

L’chi lach, on your journey I will bless you

And you shall be a blessing, and you shall be a blessing, and you shall be a blessing, L’chi lach

Shabbat Shalom.