



Hospitality: A Taste of Eternity

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Essay

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"Hospitality is among the noblest proofs of humanity."
Joseph Roth^a

Abstract

The article explicates the biblical ethic of hospitality – the welcoming of the stranger into one's midst – as adumbrating the inclusive theological sensibilities of Judaism and Christianity, ultimately setting the ground of Kant's cosmopolitan vision of eternal peace.

Keywords: Kant's cosmopolitan vision; Eternity; Ethics; Hospitality

Essay

Sitting in heat of the day at the entrance to his tent, the biblical patriarch Abraham was visited by the Presence of the Lord. Yet as he was to welcome his exalted guest, he spotted three approaching travelers, and jumped to his feet and ran to greet them, exclaiming: "Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree." As they rested, Abraham hastened back to his tent "unto Sarah, and said, make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes upon the hearth. And Abraham ran unto the herd and fetched a calf tender and good [...]; and he took butter, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before [the travelers]; and he stood by them under the tree, and they ate" (Genesis 18:1-8). Commenting on Abraham's exemplary hospitality – of what the Bible refers to as *hakhnasat orchim* (bringing guests [into one's tent]) – the rabbis observed that although the Lord appeared to Abraham, he first rushed to welcome the thirsty and hungry travelers. The rabbis thus concluded that hospitality is a greater deed than to welcome the Divine

Presence.

The association of hospitality with the serving of food and drink gave rise to the custom of receiving guests accordingly. Priding themselves on their hospitality, Polish nobility would welcome their guests accordingly. Thus the seventeenth century Polish poet Wespazjan Kochowski wrote: "O good bread, when it is given to guests with salt and good will!"¹ The custom was not confined to the Polish nobility (*szlachta*). Indeed, it is still widely practiced not only in Poland, but also throughout Eastern Europe. In Russian culture "bread" is the mark of hospitality, whereas salt is associated with enduring friendships, as expressed in a Russian idiom "to eat a *pod* of salt (together with someone): *Khleb da sol!*" (Хлеб да соль!).² 'Bread and Salt is a traditional Russian

^aJoseph Roth, *The Hotel Years*, trans., Michael Hofmann (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2015), 147.

¹ http://www.culture.pl/pl/culture/artykuly/wy_wy_chlebem_sola_wieliczka

² Robert E. F. Smith, David Christian, *Bread and Salt: A Social and Economic*

greeting uttered by a guest at the portal of a host's home as an expression of good wishes towards the host's household. In Bulgaria, the Ukraine, the Czech Republic, and other East European countries foreign dignitaries are greeted, usually by young women dressed in native costumes, with bread that they are to dip in salt and eat it.

In Judaism the Friday evening Sabbath meal is inaugurated with a prayer of sanctification – the *Kiddush* – in which the Challah-bread is broken in small pieces, dipped in salt, and distributed to all who have gathered to partake in the festive dinner, which are to be eaten only after the recitation of the prayer: “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our King of the Universe, who has brought forth bread from the earth.” The reason for dipping the Challah-bread in salt is that the Sabbath table is said to resemble the altar in the Temple in Jerusalem, where salt was offered together with the sacrificial meat. Hence, the ceremonial dipping of the bread in salt renders the Sabbath meal sacred (as, indeed, all meals are to be regarded). Since the Jerusalem altar was situated at the *axis mundi* – connecting Heaven and Earth, endowing the created order with direction and purpose – salt represents promise of harmony and peace. In consonance, the custom arose to remove all knives – the symbol of conflict and war – from the table before the grace after meals is recited.

Hospitality—the sharing of one's “bread” -- is the quintessence of the hope of humanity, a foretaste of redemption. Thus, in the New Testament Jesus tells his disciples “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in...” And when his disciples replied that they did not recall extending to him these deeds of hospitality, he assured them that when they would perform such deeds to others it would be in effect for him, implying that by loving acts of hospitality they would inherit the Kingdom God has prepared for them (Matthew 34-40).

Accordingly, Saint Paul exhorts one to “practice hospitality” (Romans 12:13). And in the Letter to the Hebrews we read: “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it” – the reference is to the three travelers

whom he invited to enter his tent for food and drink (13:2). Significantly, the koine term employed in the Greek New Testament, for hospitality is *philoxenia*, denoting affection (*philos*) for the stranger (*xenos*): to be hospitable is to show kindness toward the stranger. Why the “stranger”? For the arch of hospitality is not limited to family and friends; it may embrace individuals whom we do not know and who are different from us in ethnic origin, culture, and station in life. Thus, the Passover *seder* meal commences with a solemn proclamation: “All who are hungry, let them come and eat; all who are in need, let them come and conduct [with us] the *seder* of Passover.”

In referring to Abraham's gesture of extending hospitality to the three travelers (Genesis 18:1-22:24), the rabbis held that Abraham did not know whether they worshipped the sun or the stars or some pagan goddess. Belief in One God was not a condition of hospitality. The rabbis related that Abraham once invited a stranger to dine with him. After the meal he beckoned the stranger to join him in saying grace, thanking the God of Israel “who has brought forth bread from the earth.” The stranger refused, explaining that, “All my life I have worshipped my idols, and that's been good enough for me.” Appalled to learn that his guest was an incorrigible heathen, Abraham threw him out of his tent. That night God appeared to Abraham in a dream and reproached him, “I have put up with that man who denied me for sixty years. Can't you put up with him for a single night?” Chastened, Abraham woke up and dashed off into the wilderness, until he found the stranger, and invited him again into his tent to shelter for the night.³

The philosopher Immanuel Kant stipulated hospitality toward the stranger as an essential condition for the attainment of universal fraternity and “eternal peace.”⁴ The sharing of one's bread with a stranger is a foretaste of Eternity.

3 Midrash Genesis Rabba 38:13.

4 “Hospitality means the right of a stranger not to be treated as an enemy when he arrives in the land of another. [...] It is a supplement to the unwritten code of civil and international law, indispensable for the maintenance of the public human rights and [thereby] also perpetual peace.” Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, trans., Lewis White Beck (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1957), 20, 23. See Jacques Derrida's meditation of Kant's conception of universal hospitality not as “philanthropy but as a right.” *Of Hospitality*, trans., R. Bowly (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). [Also see S. Benhabib, “On Hospitality. Re-Reading Kant's Cosmopolitan Right,” *Sheila Benhabib, The Right of Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 25-48; and Nicholas Zavediuok, “Kantian Hospitality.” *Peace Review. A Journal of Social Justice*, 26/2 (2014); 170-177.

History of Food and Drink in Russia (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

