

Last week, I tried something I wanted to experience since I first learned about it, nearly two years ago: I visited a salt cave. A friend and I entered the cave – a spa of sorts – leaving our socks, shoes and cell phones in cubbies outside of the room, and we – along with four strangers – sat quietly for 45 minutes. The walls of the salt cave were made of salt bricks, and large loose grains of sea salt covered the floor. Through a process called halotherapy, salt-infused air was pumped into the room.

I'm not sure about the health benefits that we may have received. But I certainly experienced a mental cleanse of sorts. While I'm not really a meditator, sitting in a comfortable chair in silence for 45 minutes, in a cool, orange-tinted room, was exactly what I needed to reset. After my time in the salt cave, I felt grounded and calm. I noticed that I was clear-headed and able to make more intentional decisions. Perhaps it was the salt-infused air. Or maybe it was simply because I slowed down enough to just sit and breathe.

The beginning of Parshat Vayera is all about hurrying. Within the first seven verses of our Torah reading, we find five Hebrew words indicative of rushing:

- Abraham runs to greet the visitors – *vayarotz likratam*¹
- Abraham hurries into the tent to find Sarah – *vaymaheir* – and instructs Sarah to hurry as well – *mahari*²
- Abraham then runs to pick out a choice calf and his young servant prepares it quickly.³

Tradition lauds Abraham and Sarah for their swiftness. We use this scene in the Torah as a model of the important Jewish value of *hachnasat orchim*, welcoming guests, which the Talmud teaches is even greater than engaging in Torah Study or welcoming the Presence of God.⁴

Biblical commentaries including that of Seforno, the 16th century Italian rabbi, note that when a person performs any task with speed, this implies that they consider what they are doing to be important. Many of us operate this way. When we take immediate action to address issues, it signals to others that we are taking those problems seriously. At the same time, Seforno also comments on the words *וירץ לקראתם*, that Abraham took action before the visitors even had time to speak! In this situation, Abraham and Sarah's enthusiastic hospitality was well-received. Under other circumstances, however, overeager hosts who jump into action without assessing the needs of their guests, could be unhelpful at best, or at worst, they may present as aloof and arrogant.

¹ Genesis 18:2

² Genesis 18:6

³ Genesis 18:7

⁴ Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 127a

Avot D'Rabbi Natan, an aggadic work compiled around the 8th century CE, explores a well-known maxim from the first chapter of the Ethics of our Ancestors, Mishnah Pirkei Avot: say little, but do much:⁵

אָמַר מְעַט וַעֲשֵׂה הרבה

Avot D'Rabbi Natan⁶ expounds upon these words, arguing that righteous people say little and do a lot, but wicked people say a lot and don't do anything at all. A proof-text for this claim is none other than these opening verses from Parshat Vayera, when Abraham said to the visitors, "I will get a piece of bread, and you can dine to your heart's content."⁷ But then after that – Avot D'Rabbi Natan notes – look at what Abraham and Sarah did– they prepared a feast!

From a close read of the Torah text, however, it seems that their full feast was not served.

The Talmud⁸ questions why Abraham's instructions to Sarah include two different words – kemach and solet – which both refer to flour. The Talmud answers that this redundancy alludes to a marital disagreement about which type of flour ought to be used. Sarah wanted to use regular flour, but Abraham convinced her to use fine flour. Rabbi Yitzchak concludes from this spousal debate that women are stingy hosts. Putting aside that problematic part of this text for just a moment, the controversial cakes never made it to the table. The text of our parasha reads: [Abraham] took curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared and set these before [the guests].⁹ The guests were served milk and meat, but what happened to the bread?

On the surface, Abraham and Sarah are exceptional hosts - nonagenarians with open doors who expeditiously wait on passers-by, in spite of extreme heat. This is additionally impressive according to the great commentator, Rashi, because Abraham was still healing from circumcising himself three days prior.

Many of us are familiar with hosts like this, and perhaps we will encounter them at upcoming holiday gatherings over the next several months. These friends or family may offer us a drink and a cookie, and then proceed to present us with a full bar and a table of desserts. This positive portrayal of our patriarch and matriarch reminds me of visiting my parents' home. While it is a rare occurrence, given that my parents spend so much time in Westchester, whenever I walk through the door of their home, my mom asks me, "do you want something to eat or drink?" She then proceeds to offer me the entire

⁵ Mishna Avot 1:15

⁶ Avot D'Rabbi Natan 13:3

⁷ Genesis 18:5

⁸ Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 27a

⁹ Genesis 18:8

contents of their refrigerator. While admittedly, that sometimes feels a little overwhelming, it also makes me feel at home. Say little, but do much, as we learn from Pirkei Avot. A far better alternative to overpromising.

But we are still left with the mystery of the missing cakes. While our ancestors in the Torah are certainly fallible, I sometimes find it difficult to relate to the particulars of some of their trials and tribulations. But this alleged argument between Abraham and Sarah feels pretty realistic! For those of us who are regular hosts, or for anyone who has ever hosted a meal – anticipating the needs of others and doing our best to deliver can be a stressful process. Behind the scenes, there can be an element of chaos or tension, even if the results magically appear as an effortless cornucopia to the dinner guests. They don't know what was originally on the menu. Say little, and do much, but is there such a thing as too much? How much is too much?!

Pondering this question reminded me of an author I recently heard in an interview, Tricia Hersey, who refers to herself as the “Nap Bishop.” She is a chaplain, poet, performance artist, and community organizer. Hersey is also the founder and creator of the Nap Ministry, and her debut book, Rest is Resistance: a Manifesto, was published in October. In her book, Hersey writes:

Grind culture has normalized pushing our bodies to the brink of destruction. We proudly proclaim showing up to work or an event, despite an injury, sickness, or mental break. We are praised and rewarded for ignoring our body's need for rest, care, and repair.

Years before the Great Resignation, and before “quiet quitting” was even a thing, Hersey encouraged people to sleep during her sermons. The Nap Ministry now has an event space, housed in an Atlanta church, called the Rest Temple, which hosts naps, among other offerings. In a recent profile in the New York Times, Hersey described the Nap Ministry not as a religious movement, but as a “spiritual antidote to the earthly problems that are plaguing communities: exhaustion, chronic diseases and mental health crises.”

While the Nap Ministry has a large following online, Hersey still takes month-long “digital Sabbaths” – breaks from social media – and she encourages her followers to do the same.¹⁰

Perhaps grind culture – and hustle culture – are not new phenomena. Abraham and Sarah suffered from this very same pressure to move quickly, that many of us do today. They – and we – come by it honestly. Just like our ancestors in today's Torah reading, we want to be useful and productive. We have the best intentions when we want to be

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/13/well/live/nap-ministry-bishop-tricia-hersey.html>

welcoming and accommodating in the way that we serve others. Doing much is also impressive, and our accomplishments should be acknowledged and celebrated, but what are we sacrificing to get there?

Maybe Abraham and Sarah need not have scrambled and sacrificed their own well-being to help these strangers. They could have performed the mitzvah of welcoming guests without all of the bells and whistles. A simple piece of bread, made with regular old flour like Sarah suggested, would likely have been enough. I don't think Sarah was stingy. On the contrary, she should be praised for her practicality. Sarah was wise; she knew that doing much can easily get out of hand, because there's no upper limit. She was aware that rushing takes a toll.

Later in our parasha, on three separate occasions, Abraham rises early –

וַיִּשְׁכֶּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֶּקֶר

First, following the destruction of Sedom and Amorah; second, to send away Hagar and Ishmael; and finally, prior to the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac. Unsurprisingly, here too, the ancient rabbis view Abraham's behavior in a positive light. They understand Abraham to be an early riser because of his eagerness to perform mitzvot. It is praiseworthy from the standpoint of Jewish Law to wake up early and eagerly, ready to serve God, whether that is in the form of prayer or to observe another commandment.

However, it is troubling to imagine that our forefather was eager to send Hagar and Ishmael away. It's also curious because the Torah explicitly tells us that Abraham was distressed. Additionally, I am unable to fathom a parent ever being eager to sacrifice their child. I can't help but wonder if these are two examples in which Abraham's rushing gets completely out of hand.

I'd like to imagine Abraham like so many of us, as a habitual rusher.

He has a moment of clarity, perhaps, when he argues with God about the destruction of Sodom and Amora. But following that episode, discouraged, or maybe just by his conditioning or his nature, Abraham is back to the grind. But now, it's gone far beyond his innocuous pressuring of Sarah to prepare a fancy feast – now Abraham severely damages his relationships with his wives and endangers his children's lives.

When we move quickly, we miss a lot. We lose sight of the agency we have in our lives, and we lose the ability to make thoughtful decisions. At the same time, society praises us for being accomplished and keeping busy, and the sheer momentum of it all pushes us to continue these habits. When rushing becomes our default, it becomes harder and harder to slow down.

I do not mean to imply that delaying can function as a remedy. We see this in our parasha, too, when Lot is hesitant to leave his home in spite of imminent destruction. Sometimes urgent action is critical. But if we're not in a general state of mental clarity, we won't be able to discern what is truly urgent.

The Degel Machaneh Ephraim, a grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov, teaches that the three strangers passing by Abraham and Sarah's tent represent different character traits, one of which is chesed, kindness. He also notes that each trait has a positive and a negative element to it, and it is our responsibility to find and accentuate the good. When I first learned this hasidic text, it was surprising to conceive of a negative side of chesed, which is so often understood as being purely positive. In reflecting further on Abraham and Sarah's extreme and harried hospitality, I can imagine the pressure that observing the commandment of *hachnasat orchim* put on their relationship. I can also see the way that it may have contributed to Abraham's extreme behavior going forward. From this, we can learn that we too may need to be more intentional about the way that we perform chesed in order for it to remain a positive part of our lives. Are we helping and hosting others for the right reasons? Is it taking a toll?

When we're stuck in the grind, slowing down is so hard that it can feel impossible. But each small step in that direction also slows our momentum. So too with our good deeds. Every time we perform chesed in a way that is focused on the needs of others, without depleting ourselves, our chesed becomes a habitual practice. Shabbat Shalom!

Cantor Rabbi Levin Goldberg