



SIEBENQUELL

The day I met Abraham under the oaks of Mamre



I experienced a time of unusual hospitality during my recent holidays. I travelled to Cape Breton, in Nova Scotia to visit good friends who are building their new life there. Upon arrival, I was taken in by Jim and Wanda, the couple from whom my friends rent their apartment. From the first minute to the last of my all too brief stay, I experienced a compassionate, welcoming and generous hospitality. This encounter and experience made a deep impression on me. Ever since, I keep thinking about these two people and this place. While talking about my vacation with colleagues recently, I said: »I met Abraham under the oaks of Mamre«. The colleagues were fascinated and asked me to elaborate with that most beautiful phrase of interest in the life of another that there is: Won't you tell us the story?

The biblical story I mentioned is found in Genesis 18:1-10a and is one of the most famous stories in the Bible. Abraham is sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day by the oaks of Mamre. Suddenly three strangers appear and want to pass by. He urges them to accept some rest and food. The text calls them men. They are indeed angels who have come to announce to Sarah that she will have a child. But this story offers complications.

It says:

**»Abraham 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.
He said, 'If I have found favour in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by.«**

Here he addresses one person, in the singular, saying, »My Lord«. Afterwards, however, throughout the rest of the story, he always speaks in the plural, and addresses the three.

In one of the few exceptions where Judaism commits itself to an interpretation, Jewish law stipulates that the word »Adonai« is read here as »Lord God« instead of just »Lord«.

Why am I telling you all this? Because it has led to an extraordinary interpretation, in which it is said that Abraham interrupted God just as he was about to speak to him, and asked him to wait while he attended to his guests.

Here, then, is how the text might be read:

»The 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.«

In other words, God has arrived in order to have an encounter and conversation with Abraham.

»Abraham 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.«

Abraham has just turned away from God to meet and greet three strangers passing by.

»He said, 'If I have found favour in your eyes, (Adonai) my lord God, do not pass your servant by.«

Here Abraham turns his attention back to God and makes a request. He puts him on hold and asks him to wait, while he attends to the needs of these three travellers and offers them hospitality.

»Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree.

Let 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.«

Then Abraham lets God wait for a second time and turns his attention back to his unexpected guests.

This bold interpretation became the basis for a principle in Judaism: »Hospitality is greater than receiving the presence of God«. Faced with the choice between listening to God or offering hospitality to people, Abraham chooses the latter. God agreed to his request and waited patiently until Abraham brought food and drink to his guests before discussing the fate of Sodom with him.

How can this be? Is it not disrespectful at best, and heretical at worst, to respond to the needs of the people and serve them before the presence of God?

What the story wants to tell us is of immense depth. The idolaters of Abraham's time worshipped the sun, the stars and the powers of nature as gods. They worshipped power and the powerful. However, we cannot worship impersonal powers and remain true human beings: compassionate, philanthropic, and generous. It is precisely because we believe that God is personal, someone to whom we can say Thou, that we honour human dignity as most sacred.

Abraham, the father of monotheism, knew the paradoxical truth that if we live the life of faith, we would see the traces of God in the face of the stranger. It is easy to receive the presence of God when God appears as God. What is difficult is to sense the presence of God when it appears in disguise, as in the three anonymous passers-by. Therein lay the greatness of Abraham. He knew that serving God and offering hospitality to strangers are not two different things, but one and the same.

Thus, my statement: »I met Abraham under the oaks of Mamre«. My hosts, Jim and Wanda, were Abraham. Their house in St Ann, Cape Breton, was Mamre. Here I met people who welcomed me as warmly and lovingly as Abraham under the oaks. It was a profoundly human experience. It was also a profoundly divine experience. Ever since, I have also carried a mindful reverence within me, because I desperately needed it. My return to Germany was very difficult for me. The aggressiveness, the pushiness, the rudeness and the disregard for others depressed me from the moment I landed at the airport in Frankfurt. A few days later this prompted me to say: »The days of politeness and friendliness are over.« But that is not true. These two remarkable, courteous and kind people, and the place where I met them, remind me that there are still people who practise the high human and spiritual art of Abraham, and that I can find Mamre anywhere on earth.

I should to know. I met Abraham under the oaks of Mamre.

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