

In Genesis chapter 18 Abraham, the founder of the religions of the desert, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, sees three men approaching his tent. He approaches them (The Torah apparently emphasizes that he rushed to them) and says,

My lord, if now I have found favour in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant. Let now a little water be fetched, and wash your feet, and recline yourselves under the tree. And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and stay ye your heart; after that ye shall pass on. (Genesis 18:3–5)

The three men do sup with Abraham.

First off, it is important to note that the Hebrew is explicit concerning deity in the Bible, and that there are two very different deities that appear all through the Hebrew scripture, but that this fact is especially noticeable in the book of Genesis, which contains some very old stories. One name for God in Hebrew is Elohim, usually translated as “God” in English translations. Elohim, or El, is a very old god from the Near East, a type of deity seen in many ancient traditions. Elohim appears to be the disembodied sort of deity that is really more or less pure power and being. It is Elohim, for example, who performs the deeds in the first book of Genesis, moving on the face of the deep. The Canaanite god El had three wives, several lovers, and seventy children, so the family tree gets fairly complex. Suffice it to say for the moment that gods who approve of male-dominance in society have been around for . . . a while. . .

The other deity that appears in Genesis is Yahweh, usually translated as “LORD” in English. Yahweh is a very different sort of god. Scholars speculate that Yahweh is probably a “son of god,” one of the child of Elohim, in older Near Eastern myth, a warrior god who befriends the tribes of Israel. It is Yahweh who shows rather human emotions. Yahweh is the mover and shaker in the second book of Genesis, not disembodied as Elohim is, but physically making a man out of dust and breathing into his nostrils, then planting trees to make a garden. It is Yahweh who goes walking in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day and wonders why he can’t find Eve and Adam. It is Yahweh who shuts the door on Noah’s ark; it is Yahweh who gets worried that people are building the Tower of Babel. And it is Yahweh who sits down for a nice meal with Abraham.

Jewish tradition holds that Abraham’s tent had doors on all four sides, better to let in guests. A traditional Jewish saying for a hospitable person is, “he has the doors of Abraham.”

We must remember that by tradition Abraham left the city of his birth, Ur, and became a stranger in a strange land, a person no longer protected by the bonds of family and clan. Both Judaism and Islam have defined their religious meaning in terms of the wanderer and the stranger. Hospitality codes have been of the utmost importance. The prophet Mohammed says,

Islam began as something strange, and it will become thus again, as it was at the beginning. Blessed, therefore, are the strangers. (He was asked who the strangers are:) The strangers are those who restore what the people have corrupted of my law, as well as those who revive what has been destroyed of it. You will not enter paradise until you believe, and you will not believe until you love one another.

As Yahweh and his two companions leave Abraham, Yahweh mentions why they are passing through: Yahweh has heard some disturbing reports about what is going on in Sodom and Gomorrah, and he thinks he'd better check it out. . .

Hospitality. In the Christian tradition, the Gospel of Matthew envisions the end of the world when Jesus separates the nations into the cursed, who refused him food and drink, and the blessed, who received him. When the blessed ask, "And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?" he answers, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40). In Matthew's vision damnation waits not for the immoral but for the inhospitable. And it is in the Christian book of Hebrews (13:2) that we hear this warning: "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."

Hospitality has traditionally been a central spiritual virtue. "Hospitality" comes from Latin, "hostis," meaning "stranger." "Hospitality" is not about being nice to people you know.

In Greek mythology it was Zeus, chief of the gods, who looked out for strangers.

In Hindu tradition the Mahabharata tells us: "Even an enemy must be offered appropriate hospitality if he comes to your home. A tree does not deny its shade even to the one who comes to cut it down."

A very old Indian Buddhist legend has it that Buddha had been a hare in a previous incarnation. The story goes that one day he was out walking with a fox and an ape. The god Indra decided to test the hospitality of the three animals and appeared to them as a hungry beggar. Each animal went hunting for food and only the hare returned empty handed. Determined to be hospitable, no matter what the cost, the hare built a fire and jumped into it, feeding Indra with his own flesh. Indra was so impressed by this act of selfless hospitality that he transformed the hare into the Hare in the Moon, which Asians see rather than a man on the moon.

Last week, the youth of our congregation served a meal to kick off the Guest at Your Table program, a program sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee for more than thirty years. If you haven't gotten your box, grab one. It's your chance to be hospitable; to entertain a stranger. And maybe even an angel. . .

Thanksgiving became a national holiday by executive order of Abraham Lincoln in November of 1863. Somehow we forget that the bookend for that was National Fast Day in March of 1863.

Whether or not to have national days of thanksgiving and of penance was a much-vexed question in the early days of the United States. Did such days violate the separation of church and state? Two Unitarians, opponents in the election of 1800, explicitly disagreed concerning the concept. President John Adams declared a national day of fasting and prayer in March of 1798 and 1799. Jefferson was appalled, and, when asked to declare such a day when he was president, Jefferson responded, "...civil powers alone have been given to the President of the U S. and no authority to direct the religious exercises of his constituents." Adams, who was his own worst arm-chair quarterback, blamed the declarations for his loss to Jefferson in the election. He probably also had a bit of regret concerning his bow to political expediency, since after all, Adams once said, "God is an essence that we know nothing of."

Unitarian congregations openly and famously ignored declarations of days of fasting. Were Unitarians gluttons? Infidels? No. They tended to have two objections to these official public fasting days: first, they agreed with Jefferson's objection concerning the state meddling in matters religious. And second they objected to something that both Jefferson and Adams would have agreed with: the underlying theology that deity can be cajoled into certain actions on this earth by the actions of human beings. Fasting may be good for body and soul, but thinking that deity can be controlled by our actions is a dangerous concept. Adams and Jefferson did not know the term, but nowadays theologians call that concept "the ATM god." The idea is that god is at many convenient locations and will dispense with favors if we only have the proper card and PIN number, provided by certain religious attitudes and a contrite heart.

Unitarians did not object to fasting. Days of fasting were declared in Unitarian churches, especially as penance for the sin of slavery during the abolition movement.

Abraham Lincoln would probably have gotten on well with Adams and Jefferson in discussions of religion, since Lincoln once said, "It will not do to investigate the subject of religion too closely, as it is apt to lead to Infidelity." Lincoln declared several days of fasting and days of thanksgiving during his presidency. Yet he was mindful of the awful irony that both sides prayed to the same concept of God and justified their murderous actions with the same scripture. An anecdote from the time has it that two Quakers were discussing which side would win the war. The first Quaker said, "Clearly the South, because Jefferson Davis is a praying man." The other Quaker objected, saying, "But Mr. Lincoln prays too!" "Yes," said the first, "but God assumes it's a joke."

Whatever his true religious feelings, Lincoln did not believe in an ATM god or a Yahweh who comes down with dinner plans. The story goes that once a group of people were visiting with Lincoln when some particularly bad news from the front arrived. A person in the group sought to comfort Lincoln by pointing out that, despite the temporary setback, God was on

the North's side. Lincoln replied, "I can try to be on God's side, but must not presume that God is on mine."

Like Lincoln, I am not about to presume to say what God wants this Thanksgiving season. I do, however, believe we do well to remember the skepticism of public piety passed on to us by our Unitarian forebears. It's interesting, isn't it, that we have a public day of thanksgiving, but the day of fasting and penance has gone by the wayside. . . It's certainly lucky that such a day doesn't fall on Black Friday!

I do believe in the spiritual practices of hospitality and gratitude. Whether you believe that Elohim is watching; or that Yahweh may stop by your tent; whether you believe that you might be entertaining angels unawares, it is certainly good practice to act as if these things might occur. After all, our first response, our reptilian brain response, is "I've got mine! I DESERVE this! I'm keeping mine!"

It is our souls, our limbic systems, our God genes, that tell us: It is good to find a tent when we are wandering in the desert. It is good to welcome the stranger. I can relate to wandering in the wilderness. After all, I am blessed to eat what I did not plant, what I did not kill. I am blessed with enough, when two billion or so of my sisters and brothers cannot say the same.

It is good when we say, as did Abraham long ago, "I will fetch a morsel of bread, and stay ye your heart; after that, ye shall pass on."