

(ז) וְאֶל־הַבָּקָר רֵץ אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקַּח בְּוֶבֶקָר רֶדֶד וְטוֹב וַיִּתֵּן אֶל־הַנְּעָר  
וַיְמַהֵר לַעֲשׂוֹת אֹתוֹ.

(ח) וַיִּקַּח חֶמְאָה וְחֹלֵב וּבְוֶהַבָּקָר אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וַיִּתֵּן לַפְּנִיָּהֶם וְהוּא  
עֹמֵד עֲלֵיהֶם תַּחַת הָעֵץ וַיֹּאכְלוּ.

## AVRAHAM FEEDS HIS GUESTS

The Gemara<sup>21</sup> says that the three words *calf*, *tender* and *good* refer to three separate animals that Avraham slaughtered, in order to give each of his three guests a calf's tongue with mustard.<sup>22</sup>

### Consider the following questions:

1. Why did Avraham need to slaughter three animals? Let him give each guest an excellent cut of meat from a single animal!
2. According to the Gemara, why does verse 7 say, “and gave it to the youth, and he hurried to prepare **it**,” if there were three separate animals? It should use the plural, “them.”
3. The same problem recurs in verse 8, where the phrase “and **the calf** that he had prepared” is speaking of a single animal. If there were three calves here, the verse should at least have been worded as it was in the previous verse: “**the calf, tender and good** that he had prepared.”
4. Our Sages<sup>23</sup> have told us that Avraham kept all the mitzvos, even the Rabbinic ones like *eruv tavshilin*. Why, then, did Avraham serve his guests milk and meat together?

20. Our translation of the word חֶמְאָה as *cream* rather than “butter” follows Rashi.

21. *Bava Metzia* 86b.

22. This Gemara is quoted by Rashi to our verse.

23. *Yoma* 28b. See further sources in Alshich above to *Parashas Lech Lecha* 17:1–2 footnote 129.

5. Since Avraham's three guests were actually angelic beings who had no need for food, why did they eat the food Avraham offered them?<sup>24</sup>

Avraham wanted to treat each of his three guests as being equally important, and he wanted them to know that he regarded them as such. To accomplish this, he had to slaughter a separate animal for each of his guests; and for them to know that he had done so, he had to give them each a tongue.<sup>25</sup> Obviously, if he had served each one a different cut of meat, they could easily assume that the portions all came from the same animal and they would not realize that he regarded them as equally important. [This answers Question 1.]

Answer to  
Question 1

Avraham needed help to cook the tongues.<sup>26</sup> In order to educate his son in *hachnasas orchim* and enable him to earn merit for fulfilling the mitzvah, he called upon Yishmael — the *youth* of our verse.<sup>27</sup> Avraham took one tongue to prepare by himself, and gave one to Yishmael, expecting that after Yishmael finished with that one he would prepare the third as well. [This answers Question 2.]

Answer to  
Question 2

[Avraham] hurried to prepare it — but Yishmael was not as quick to do a mitzvah as his father, and did not finish cooking his tongue by the time Avraham had finished preparing his. Avraham did not want his hungry guests to have to wait any longer, but he had only one tongue ready. Since giving them each

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24. The Alshich here takes our verse literally, that the angels actually ate. See similarly *Midrash Eliyahu Rabbah, parashah 13* (ed. Ish Shalom). It may be noted, however, that *Midrash Rabbah* (on our verse and in many other places) states that it only appeared as if they were eating.

25. He could also have given them any other cut of meat of which there is only one per animal. The tongue happens to be regarded as a particularly important cut.

26. As Avraham was elderly and, according to Rashi to verse 1, he was recuperating from his *bris milah*.

27. Rashi here.

a third of a tongue would not be honorable, nor would it demonstrate to his guests that he regarded each of them equally, he therefore took *the one calf* (i.e., the tongue) *that he had prepared* to give to only one of his guests. [This answers Question 3.] He also took *cream and milk* to give to the second and third guests, respectively.<sup>28</sup> Each one would thus receive his own respectable, unique dish. Avraham did not serve cream or milk to the same person who received meat. [This answers Question 4.]

Answer to  
Question 3

Answer to  
Question 4

Regarding Question 5, we may offer three possible explanations, each based on a different aspect of verse 8, which states: *And he stood over them* (וְהוּא עֹמֵד עֲלֵיהֶם) *under the tree and they ate*.

- (1) The first answer is hinted at in the fact that for no apparent reason the verse tells us that Avraham and his guests were *under the tree*, and that the apparently extraneous word “*he*” (הוא) is included. Avraham was not sure if his guests were human beings or angels,<sup>29</sup> so even though he was elderly and in pain from his *bris milah*, he stood by them after serving them. By doing so, he would be able to see if they ate his food or not. If they did, he could assume they were people; but if the food simply “disappeared,” he would know they were angels. When the angels saw that “*he*” — i.e., Avraham, who was sick and frail — was standing over them *under the tree*, i.e., outside, instead of inside his home where he could rest and recuperate, they were embarrassed not to eat what he had prepared for them.
- (2) The second answer focuses on why the Torah states, “*and he stood*” instead of just, “he stood.” The extra letter

28. It is possible that in those days (before the invention of the refrigerator), fresh milk and cream were much more of a delicacy than they are today. Otherwise it would seem that the guests who received the dairy products were less important than the one who got the tongue.

29. See Alshich above, 18:2–3.

ו (and) tells us that Avraham was not standing alone; rather, God was standing there with him. (God stood wherever Avraham stood, for as we learned earlier,<sup>30</sup> after his circumcision Avraham served as the Chariot for the Divine Presence.) [And since God was the One Who sent the angels to enable Avraham to perform the mitzvah of *hachnasas orchim*,<sup>31</sup> which includes having the guests eat,] the angels were embarrassed not to partake of what he had prepared for them.

- (3) The third answer is connected to why the verse says that Avraham stood “over them” (עָלֵיהֶם — lit., *on them* or *above them*). The Midrash<sup>32</sup> says that when Moshe went up to heaven to take the Torah, the angels wanted to harm him. God made Moshe’s face look like Avraham’s and said to the angels, “Aren’t you embarrassed before him? Isn’t this the person whom you went down from heaven to visit, and you ate in his house?”<sup>33</sup> The angels then left Moshe alone.

What was so significant about the angels having eaten in Avraham’s house that this was enough to convince them to leave Moshe alone and let him take the Torah?

To answer this question, we must understand two things: First, until that point in time, the entire world — that is, the physical world, as well as the heavenly realms, the realms of the

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30. See Alshich above, 18:2–3.

31. Rashi to verse 18:1 (end).

32. *Shemos Rabbah* 28:1.

33. “And as such, you owe him a favor, and you should let his descendants, the Jewish people, take the Torah” (see *Imrei Yosher* there). The angels knew that it was Moses, for they had already seen him. A number of commentators on the Midrash explain that God only made Moses look like Avraham in order to increase their sense of indebtedness (see *Eitz Yosef* there).

angels — had been sustained by Avraham’s acts of *chesed*.<sup>34</sup> Second, as we already said above, before Avraham’s *bris milah* the heavenly angels served as the Divine Chariot (the vehicle “carrying” the Divine Presence), but after his *bris milah* God chose *him* to serve as the Divine Chariot.<sup>35</sup> Thus the Torah’s statement that “*He [Avraham] stood above them*” means that Avraham stood on a higher spiritual level than the angels and was superior to them. And the statement that the angels were *under the tree* means that they were no longer “under” the Divine Presence (as God’s Chariot), for now Avraham had taken their place.

Thus, God wanted the angels to eat the food that Avraham served them in order to symbolize [to them and to the world] that until then Avraham had been keeping them alive. Because Avraham had taken their place in bringing the Presence of God to all of Creation, the angels were humbled and therefore ate.<sup>36</sup> [This answers Question 5.]<sup>37</sup>

Answer to  
Question 5

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34. See Alshich above, 18:2–3 with footnote 14.

35. It is not clear if Avraham became God’s Chariot immediately after his circumcision (which occurred two days before the angels came to visit — see Rashi to verse 1) or only on the day the three angels came to visit.

36. The Alshich contrasts the angels’ behavior here with the episode of Gidon in *Shoftim* 6:21. Gidon tried to give food to the angel that appeared to him, but the angel did not eat it, instead causing a fire to consume the food. This was because Gidon was not on the level of our forefather Avraham. (See also the episode of the angel that appeared to Shimshon’s parents to announce his birth. There, too, the food they brought was not eaten by the angel.)

37. The Alshich thus appears to be saying that when Hashem made Moshe look like Avraham, He was reminding the angels that they owed a debt to Avraham (and therefore to his descendant Moshe) for having sustained the heavenly realms through his acts of *chesed*. Furthermore, Hashem was reminding them that the Jewish people were capable, like Avraham, of reaching an even higher level than the angels themselves — and therefore deserved to receive the Torah.