

## **A Call to Practice Hospitality**

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Tonight, I'd like to introduce a topic to you that we will have many opportunities to study and engage in throughout the coming year. This topic is **Hospitality** or **Welcome**.

Hospitality – welcoming guests – *hachnasat orachim* in Hebrew - is one of the basic principles of creating real and lasting community - surely a goal for us here at Agudas Achim – and an appropriate point of reflection for Rosh Hashanah. Hospitality is, unfortunately, often something we take for granted. We assume and nod toward it without really examining its place in our tradition or our methods to act in hospitable and welcoming ways. It seems to many of us that Hospitality – at least in the sense of welcoming others – especially welcoming strangers – is sadly not practiced or encouraged in contemporary America and that we are in danger of becoming an anti-social isolationist society.

Rabbi Ron Wolfson – a lecturer and teacher on the art of welcoming - says that we are in danger of losing the art of hospitality. “We don’t welcome strangers any more; we are afraid of them. We don’t invite people to our homes anymore; we entertain at restaurants or clubs. We don’t greet people on the street; we avoid them. We don’t even answer our phones without checking caller ID to see if it is someone we know or want to talk to.” Wolfson suggests that in keeping to ourselves, visiting only those with

whom we are already friends and talking only to those people we wish to talk to, we are slowly losing a part of our souls.

“Kindness to others,” Wolfson says, “is not simply an imperative to improve the lives of those who seek welcome. The act of hospitality improves the lives of those who offer it. Welcoming, serving and feeding others embody the values of generosity of spirit, of sharing what we have, of caring for others when they are in need.” In short, the act of offering welcome is an act that humanizes us and nourishes our souls.

On this Rosh Hashana, I would like to talk about Hospitality not only in practical terms but also in this spiritual sense – in the sense of welcoming others as reflection of the Divine in the world – as made in God’s image. *Hachnasat Orachim* in Hebrew is not simply a matter of putting on a smile when someone comes to the door. It literally means “Bringing in of Guests.” The “bringing in” part is an active transitive verb – one causes one to come in. There is nothing passive about it.

*Hachnasat ORachim* in Judaism is considered a *mitzvah* – not simply a nice thing to do or a good deed, but a *mitzvah* – a commandment from God. It is such an important commandment that in rabbinic literature, we are told that to welcome a guest is more important (and takes precedence over) welcoming the *Shekinah* or Divine Presence of God.

Judaism’s pre-eminent model for hospitality is none other than Abraham – the first Jew and the father of our people. The lengths to which Abraham goes to welcome guests are found in the Torah passages shortly

before those we read on Rosh Hashana. Given in specific detail and precise recording, a picture of an eagerly hospitable Abraham emerges from Genesis 18:

“1 And God appeared unto him by the terebinths of Mamre, as he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day; 2 and he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood over against him; and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed down to the earth.

3 He said: 'My lord, if now I have found favour in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant. 4 Let now a little water be fetched, and wash your feet, and recline yourselves under the tree. 5 And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and stay ye your heart; after that ye shall pass on; forasmuch as ye are come to your servant.' And they said: 'So do, as thou hast said.'

6 And Abraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said: 'Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes.' 7 And Abraham ran unto the herd, and fetched a calf tender and good, and gave it unto the servant; and he hastened to dress it. 8 And he took curd, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat.”

These eight lines of Torah offer us a detailed and precise account of Abraham's actions in a book that is known for its terseness and condensed nature. Readers over the centuries have been fascinated with this account and have read out of it prescriptions for fulfilling the mitzvah of *hachnasat*

*orachim* – welcoming guests. Some of the lines are worth a deeper look for us tonight as we engage this topic:

“Abraham was sitting in door of his tent in the heat of the day.” What was Abraham – a shepherd and wealthy landowner doing sitting in his tent in the heat of the day? According to our text, in the previous chapter Abraham had just undergone the painful and – one assumes exhausting – ordeal of circumcision at the age of 99! He was home recovering. But Abraham was not inside in the shade, sleeping on his bed – he was sitting at the door. The rabbis of the second century assume Abraham was in fact waiting to see who might pass by and need a drink – he was looking for, seeking out, awaiting potential guests to welcome into his home.

“When he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed down to the earth.” Abraham couldn’t possibly know that these three men were divine visitors – in fact he had no way of knowing who they were – they were indeed strangers to him. And yet he ran to meet them and to bow down to them – to treat them with the respect and honor we would treat royalty. And perhaps by treating them as a divine presence they indeed became that presence, bringing with them the good news that Abraham and Sarah were going to have a child.

“Let now a little water be fetched, and wash your feet, and recline yourselves under the tree. 5 And I will fetch a morsel of bread.” Abraham offers his guests comfort for their bodies – an opportunity to wash and relax – he prepares a bath for them and then prepares a sumptuous meal serving the best he has to offer.

This text is so rich with detail that the Chafetz Chaim – an important Eastern European scholar of the 18th century derived a widely circulated 10-point plan for welcoming guests from this text. It is often referred to in rabbinic exhortations to their communities to open the doors of their homes to strangers.

In rereading the texts in preparation for these holy days, I noticed that in the stories we read over Rosh Hashana, Abraham's actions are all at the request of other individuals – Sarah in the story of Ishmael's exile and God in the story of the *akkedah* – the binding of Isaac. But earlier – in the stories of Abraham's hospitality – he is acting of his own accord and out of his own sense of appropriate behavior – we might say that the texts that describe Abraham's hospitality to strangers is a more authentic image of Abraham's innate personality – at least as the biblical authors imagined it.

It is not hard to understand why, for this desert nomad, hospitality would be so important. The desert is a harsh environment – travelers have to contend with lack of water and food, roaming bandits, storms and other dangers. Finding an open tent and welcome respite is crucial to one's survival – and this in what we also think of as some of the most inhospitable, lonely and dangerous places on earth. Today, in the remnants of desert culture we see in the Bedouin of the Negev Desert -- welcoming guests still plays a vital role in the social contracts of their community –to drink coffee with a Bedouin in his tent is to accept not only his coffee but his protection, friendship and loyalty for a long time to come. The same is true of many indigenous desert cultures of the near east. In the mountainous deserts of Afghanistan, guests are invited to drink three cups of tea – for the first you

are strangers, for the second – friends and by the third, you have become a member of the family.

As inheritors of this biblical tradition, we too must see Hospitality – *Hachnasat Orachim* as crucial to our survival. As Jews, we are told over and over again to welcome the stranger because we were once strangers and we know the plight of the stranger. We carry the memory of wandering and vulnerability in our bones and in our stories and we open the door wide on Passover declaring “let all who are hungry come and eat” Like Abraham, we Jews must have an open tent and food on hand to provide for our guests. It is the way of the desert and the way of the Jews.

It is also an act of Justice – of *Tzedek*.

Another Jewish story of hospitality relates to its absence and can be found at the opposite end of the Torah – in Deuteronomy just before the people are about to cross over into the land and set up their homes. In Deuteronomy we are given the laws of behavior as a settled people – no longer the nomadic life of Abraham or his sons, we are now looking at a Jewish society that will have towns and cities and the established rule of law. In Parashat Shoftim, a very odd ceremony is described:

<sup>1</sup> If, in the land that the Lord your God is assigning you to possess, someone slain is found lying in the open, the identity of the slayer not being known, <sup>2</sup> your elders and magistrates shall go out and measure the distances from the corpse to the nearby towns. <sup>3</sup> The elders of the town nearest to the corpse shall then take a heifer, which has never been worked, which has

never pulled in a yoke; 4 and the elders of that town shall bring the heifer down to an ever-flowing wadi, which is not tilled or sown. There, in the wadi, they shall break the heifer's neck...<sup>6</sup> Then all the elders of the town nearest to the corpse shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken in the wadi.<sup>7</sup> And they shall make this declaration: "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done."<sup>8</sup> Absolve, O Lord, Your people Israel whom You redeemed, and do not let guilt for the blood of the innocent remain among Your people Israel." And they will be absolved of bloodguilt.<sup>9</sup> Thus you will remove from your midst guilt for the blood of the innocent, for you will be doing what is right in the sight of the Lord.

Let me summarize: if a dead person is found outside the limits of the surrounding towns then a determination is made as to which jurisdiction the body is in – the distance to all the nearby towns is measured and the one closest to the location of the body is found to have jurisdiction over this case.

At that point, the elders of the town offer a sacrifice of an unblemished cow and recite a formula to cleanse themselves for the guilt for the blood of the innocent victim.

What is this bizarre and obscure ritual about?

In the Talmud, the rabbis suggest that the offering of this unblemished heifer only comes on account of inhospitality. When the elders of the town seek expiation for their guilt they are not confessing to actual murder of the poor victim. Rather, they are seeking expiation for the possibility that any

in-hospitality this man met with lead to his death. What they are saying is that, if this man came to the town looking for food and lodging and these were not provided, then they may, indeed, be responsible for his death and need to atone for their negligence.

Rabbi Yoel Sperka, a contemporary commentator, suggests that an individual who passes through a town is an outsider, a stranger. “She is out of her element and, as such, is subject to a great deal of isolation - social isolation which can easily lead to existential isolation. If someone comes through town and is virtually ignored by the townspeople her sense of isolation is increased. Along with this, her sense of self-worth and self-esteem are threatened; she simply doesn't make a difference here.

“Someone in this state of mind who is set upon by a highway robber has much less fight in her with which to defend himself. She is easily overpowered by the thug who jumps her outside of city limits.”

Rabbi Sperka’s comments suggest that the lack of hospitality – the lack of welcome and care – can create a situation in which people who may already be vulnerable become even more so. They become more vulnerable not because of the lack of food and water, but because their sense of self-worth is diminished. The elders of the town in the Torah’s scenario are acutely aware of the dangers posed to travelers on the road. They know that any lack of provision or comfort to this traveler may have put him at great risk and be tantamount to murder. But the risk is more than just one of safety and security; it is existential to the human condition.

Rabbi Sperka also paints for us the opposite picture: “Take, on the other hand, someone who has the opposite experience. He comes to town and is immediately the subject of a fight between families who are vying for the opportunity to host him, to wine and dine him. When he must take his leave, his hosts beg him to stay one more day and, when he finally does leave, they escort him to the edge of the town and a few steps further, just to delay their parting.

Someone who has had this type of experience sets out on his inter-village journey with a stout heart and an increased (and, we hope, realistic) sense of his own worth and importance. Someone like this who is jumped outside of town has a real fighting chance (pun intended) to defend himself.

In other words, hospitality, true hospitality takes those who are vulnerable and raises them up, supporting them in such a way that they are more likely to meet the unexpected with strength and dignity to fight on. They see themselves as having worth and value and that they have something to offer to the world. And who of us does not think of ourselves as vulnerable at different points in our daily lives – starting new schools, new jobs, being put into new situations where we feel isolated and may begin to question the value of our perspective, our knowledge, our self-worth? Don’t think that it is just the visibly weak or feeble who are vulnerable. It is all of us. And we need to recognize it in ourselves and in others and begin to welcome each other into our lives in a way that builds self-worth and doesn’t perpetuate our isolation.

Hospitality – welcoming guests and strangers – is part of our collective inheritance and also an act of Justice – of *Tzedek*. I would suggest

to you tonight that we currently do live in a desert – that we are all vulnerable travelers – and that our very lives may in fact depend on our ability to open up our homes to one another and to those who cross our path.

We, at Agudas Achim, pride ourselves on being a “warm and welcoming” community. But what does that really mean? Most of the time, our members and our board hosts greet strangers here in a warm and friendly way. We do a good job of making sure we get people’s names and numbers and we may even call them up after a visit to invite them back and I do know that some very deep and long-lasting friendships have been forged under this roof. We try to make our services accessible to non-Jews and those unfamiliar with Hebrew and we are explicit about welcoming people in different places on their Jewish journeys. That is all great and something we can be proud of.

But how much do we really know about one another in this community and about our individual and family joys and struggles? How often do we really take the time to find out where people are in their lives and what they need?

At a time when people no longer live near extended family and other social connections in our country are declining rapidly, this synagogue may be the only place some people are greeted warmly and asked how they are. If that is the case, then we have an obligation to be sincere – we should really want to know how we each are – not so that we can necessarily do anything to fix whatever ails us (although there is work to be done there too) but so that we can offer up a connection, reach out to that holy spark within

them and – maybe – for a moment – allow it to shine a little brighter in being met by the spark within each of us as well.

What we offer in welcoming each other and strangers is a chance at connection – real connection. And connection is the only known cure for the plague of isolation that runs so rampant through our society in this era.

Over the next several days I will speak more about hospitality and the act of welcoming. I started by mentioning that some rabbis say that welcoming guests takes precedence over welcoming Shekhina – the Presence of God. I would like to suggest that with kavannah (intention) and mindfulness, true welcoming – the welcoming that allows us to see each other as divine sparks – IS welcoming the presence of the divine. I look forward to sharing that work with you. Shana tova.