

Hospitality Comes with Challenges

Shabbat Vayera 5779

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Tonight, we welcome guests to Congregation B'nai Israel. Thanks to Lindsey and Dan, our gathering includes lifelong Temple members as well as family and friends from afar, spanning the generations. We are so pleased to include Christians and adherents of other religion or none. And let's not forget the folks who attend on Friday nights week in and week out – congregants, conversion candidates, and others who have become part of our Temple family.

We aim to create a sacred, meaningful Shabbat experience for everyone. That doesn't happen without effort, especially from our musicians and from those who prepared the lovely Oneg Shabbat tonight. Celebrating our diverse congregation, we work hard to be inclusive. We are mindful that many have little familiarity with Hebrew, even as we know that many others prefer traditional worship. As in all matters, worship tastes shift with generations. David Bauman and I had one difference of opinion about a musical selection for this service. I was considering the parents' generation; David, rightly, made a priority of the bride and groom and their contemporaries.

Complicating matters further, preaching social justice has been a priority of this pulpit at least since Rabbi Ira Sanders assumed it in 1926. One could avoid discussing controversial matters of the day, endeavoring to make everybody comfortable, pleasing some, but others would find that quiescence false at this fraught moment in American life.

In short, even for a synagogue, hospitality comes with challenges. *Hachnasat orchim*, welcoming guests, is a *mitzvah*, a Jewish religious obligation. I suspect that out of town guests are already finding that *mitzvah* to be fulfilled to overflowing this weekend – you know, there's no hospitality like southern hospitality except southern Jewish hospitality! As certain as I am that the welcome will appear effortless, we all know that tremendous work and commitment are involved.

Abraham and Sarah, our original religious ancestors, put on a fine display of hospitality in this week's Torah portion, beginning before we even notice. Abraham is sitting at the entrance of the tent. Those who read the end of last week's Torah portion will know that he's still recovering from his circumcision.ⁱ

Nevertheless, our sages insist that, even in his post-surgical infirmity, Abraham is at the door of his tent so that he will be ever-ready to receive any visitors who may pass by.ⁱⁱ Abraham and Sarah are so eager to offer hospitality that they keep their tent open on all four sides, “so that from all sides that [passersby] come, they will find an open door and ... will turn into it.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Abraham does soon see three travelers, and he invites them in for a lavish meal.^{iv} Abraham and Sarah make hospitality look easy. They certainly make it a priority. Later, when Abraham sends a servant to find a wife for Isaac, the servant chooses Rebekah on the basis of her offer to draw copious amounts of water for him and his camels.^v Hospitality is as much a priority for the second generation as the first.

Jewish tradition’s stories about hospitality are not all so happy. The Talmud tells of a man who sends servant to go and invite his friend, a man named Kamtza, to a feast. The servant makes a mistake, though, and summons a guest with a similar name, Bar Kamtza, a man whom the host hates. When the host finds Bar Kamtza seated at the banquet, he demands that Bar Kamtza leave. Bar Kamtza begs the host not to embarrass him publicly, but to let him eat a bit before making a quiet exit. Bar Kamtza even offers to pay the entire cost of the feast, but the host will have none of it, creating a public spectacle in a room full of Torah sages, as he rousts Bar Kamtza from the party. Bar Kamtza reaches a sad conclusion: “Since the Sages were sitting there and did not protest the actions of the host, though they saw how he humiliated me, [I must infer] that they were content with what he did.” Bar Kamtza repays the hateful host and complicit sages by betraying them to the Roman Emperor, ultimately leading to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.^{vi}

The story is meant to teach us the consequences of failing to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *hachnasat orchim*, the religious obligation to welcome guests. It also serves as instruction about the disaster that can result from unmitigated hatred.

Tonight, I would like to suggest that we draw an additional lesson from the tale: Hospitality can be hard. The host’s reprehensible his behavior is motivated by his real and serious discomfort with Bar Kamtza’s presence in his home.

We’ve all been there. The dinner guest who tells a racist joke. The guest who gets too drunk at the party, making a scene. We’ve also experienced discomfort at a place we call “home” – our house of worship, the schools we call *alma mater*, a camp where we’ve enjoyed for countless summers. Something

about it no longer feels the way it once did. New people. Unfamiliarity, in a place where familiarity matters so much. A new generation has arrived with new ways. Not wishing to be bigots, we may just not be used to being around people who are different in whatever way – an accent, the language spoken, a gender identity we don't understand. Most of us don't behave badly, like Bar Kamtza's host, publicly humiliating the newcomers and making them feel unwelcome. The hard part, instead, is that we feel like foreigners in a place we call home.

In the 1920s, Americans became increasingly uncomfortable with newcomers and their unfamiliar ways. Even at that time of great prosperity, populists were able to stoke fears that foreigners would usurp jobs and change American ways. Again today, for tens of millions of our fellow citizens, immigration makes America feel less American, making immigrants are a ripe target. Many of us, myself included, have been using language that labels anti-immigrant fervor as evil. Perhaps, though, we would be more successful if we took a moment to consider the discomfort of Bar Kamtza's host, represented today by some of our fellow Americans.

With greater sensitivity – based on the challenges that we, too, face in being hospitable – we may be better positioned to advocate for the immigrants who most need our American tent to be open on all four sides. Jews know the disastrous results of America's having closed those tent doors in the '20s. Our nation's closed ports of entry left millions at the mercy of the Nazis. Hillel taught that our entire Torah may be summed up in the injunction, "What is hateful to you, do not do to anybody else."^{vii} That moral imperative requires us to do whatever we can to assure that we can to assure that our country does not consign desperate families to murderous gangs in Central America because our nation's doors are shut tight.

As we celebrate the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah, let us acknowledge that opening the tent is never as easy as it they made it look. Then, let us come together, with sincere effort, and pull those tent flaps up all the same. Let hard work, as much as hospitality, be our heritage.

Amen.

ⁱ Bava Metzia 86b cited in Rashi on Genesis 18:1.

ⁱⁱ Rashi on Genesis 18:1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbeinu Yonah's commentary to Pirkei Avot 1:5.

^{iv} Genesis 18:2-8.

^v Genesis 24:12-20.

^{vi} Gittin 55b-56a.

^{vii} Shabbat 31a.