

## Rosh Hashanah 5774 Welcoming Guests

Shabbat Shalom.

It's so nice to welcome all of you to Talya's Bat-Mitzvah!

Oops – I seemed to have brought the wrong sermon!!

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☺ Seriously, it's so nice to see everyone again, as many of us were together just a week and a half ago for Talya's bat-mitzvah. Let me reflect for a moment on that event.

There were many great aspects - Talya, herself, even without a voice, and then her voice miraculously returning, the perfect weather, the fact that 650 guests were able to enjoy Shabbat lunch together, and the wonderful feeling in the shul of support, sharing and love.

Let me take this opportunity to thank the entire Emunah community - it takes a village to raise a child and it takes a village to hold a bat-mitzvah.

The Temple Emunah family - the leadership, the staff, and the entire community made it *such* a wonderful *simhah*.

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As Sharon and I started thinking about scheduling Talya's bat-mitzvah, the first issue we faced was whether it should take place on Shabbat or on another day when the Torah is read, a Monday holiday or a *Rosh Hodesh*, for example.

Of course, we preferred Shabbat because it's so special, but many of our family and friends and many of Talya's friends are *shomrei Shabbat* – they do not ride on Shabbat and there is no hotel within a reasonable walk of our shul.

Where would our guests stay? Many family and friends advised us to avoid the challenges inherent in a Shabbat bat-mitzvah.

But having us all together on Shabbat morning, enjoying the experience that most people have in our shul was the way we wanted to celebrate.

So Sharon and I asked for help from families that live around the shul. We asked members and others - Jews and non-Jews. And here's the thing: they said yes. They opened their homes to some 45 of our guests from out of town, most of them perfect strangers to their hosts, who needed to be close to the shul.

And not only that, there were many more who offered to host, whose offers, in the end, we did not need to utilize.

But, don't get rid of that inflatable mattress just yet, we may need you next time!

Not only was this extremely helpful, but it's actually a *mitzvah: hakhnasat or<sup>h</sup>im* - welcoming guests. Sharon and I have been hosted by strangers in places like Riverdale, Houston, and Milwaukee – treated to wonderful *Shabbatot* where connections were made and time was shared. There is this wonderful sense of being together and sharing sacred time together – even with people we just met.

Growing up, hosting people was part of my life.

When I was really young, a pre-schooler, living in Peter Cooper Village in Manhattan, my father once got a call from a woman looking for “Rabbi Lerner.” Although he was happy to help out, he thinks that she was actually looking for the Orthodox rabbi at Beth Israel Hospital, not the Conservative rabbi at Town & Village Synagogue.

On the phone, she asked: “Rabbi Lerner?”

“Yes?”

“Can you help me? My father is close to death at Beth Israel and my sister needs to spend the last days of *Pesah* there with him.”

“Well, we have room on the sleep sofa in the living room, but it's Pesah so no-one can bring food into our house unless it's *hekhshered* kosher for *Pesah*.”

“Not a problem, we wouldn't eat in your house anyway! We're *frum*, from Boro Park; she'll eat in the hospital.”

My mother bought some things that she thought the woman might be willing to eat – bananas, oranges – and awaited her arrival. The first day she spent entirely in the hospital and ate nothing in our apartment. The second day, she actually drank a cup of tea from our cup and had a piece of *hekhshered* kosher for *Pesah* cake from Gertel's Kosher Bakery on the Lower East Side.

In the intervening years, her name has been forgotten to my family, but the time that was shared, even coming from slightly different worlds, was precious.

Through the years, my parents have hosted my father's conversion students – some from places like Glasgow, Darmstadt, Alsace and Colombia – and my mother's JTS students.

In fact, Sharon slept in my bed before we were married, but I wasn't there. She and her friend Arden were taking a seminar with my mother and my parents hosted them for Shabbat.

Sharon and I, together with our children, feel strongly about this tradition and have hosted scholars-in-residence, bar and bat mitzvah guests, and staff and members of our community who have preferred not to drive to shul.

Recently, we hosted a family we did not know to help a friend. As we sat down for cup of tea Friday night, we realized that we had friends in common and in fact, the father and Sharon had gone on USY on Wheels together 27 years ago! Over the course of Shabbat, we found much that we had in common.

Last Shabbat, we were the recipients, hosted by three different families in two states. It's complicated, but Sharon was in Riverdale for the bat-mitzvah of the daughter of one of her closest friends, the children and I were guests at the bat mitzvah of one of Talya's class-mates in Cambridge. Talya, along with some of her classmates, was with one family; the boys and I, with another, whom we had never met.

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OK, convenient, helpful, but a *mitzvah*? Does God get involved in who sleeps in my guest room? What's the source of this idea? How important is *hakhnasat orhim* - welcoming guests?

Rabbinic Judaism divides *mitzvot*, or commandments, into two large categories, those that express the relationship between humans and God and those concerned with caring for other human beings. Our prayers today are in the first category; our concern for others, in the second.

*Hakhnasat orhim* is a great *mitzvah*, an expression of *gemilut hasidim* - acts of loving kindness. In a passage that is incorporated into *Siddur Sim Shalom*, the Talmud in *Masekhet Shabbat*, states: "These are the deeds that yield immediate fruit [immediate benefit] and continue to yield fruit in time to come [meaning, they are such powerful deeds, the positive reverberations are felt in realms beyond]: performing deeds of loving

kindness; attending to the house of study punctually - morning and evening; providing hospitality; visiting the sick; helping the needy bride; attending the dead; probing the meaning of prayer; making peace between one person and another, and between a husband and wife. And the study of Torah is equivalent to them all.” (Shabbat 127a)

This is a wonderful passage and a thought-provoking list - why did the rabbis place probing prayer here? Why is study so central? I will return to some of these topics on Yom Kippur, but for today, I want to emphasize the status that welcoming guests holds. It is clearly a major mitzvah.

But again, why?

To fully answer that question, let's go back to the roots of our tradition in the Middle East some 4,000 years ago. Our spiritual ancestors were mostly nomads who wandered through the desert and the wilderness. To survive on a journey, you relied upon the generosity of others. Out of this difficult environment, a clear moral value emerged: take care of a guest, even at great cost to yourself. The Torah teaches us that hospitality is sacred, and taking care of the *ger*, the stranger, was particularly important, “*ki gerim hayitem be'ereetz mitzrayim* - for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Lev. 19:34)

While there are numerous examples of *hakhnasat orh<sup>im</sup>* in the Tanakh, in the Hebrew Bible, perhaps the most powerful occurs just before this morning's Torah reading.

Abraham is sitting at the entrance of his tent at the heat of the day. This is strange since one would expect him to be farther inside where it would be cooler. The Midrash builds on this, adding that Avraham's tent was open on all four sides to receive guests.

Sure enough, three men show up. As soon as he sees them, Abe runs out to greet them, bowing before their presence and inviting them to bathe, to rest and to eat something. The guests agree and Sarah and Abraham spring into action quickly preparing a meal for the strangers. (Gen 18:1-8)

Since in the opening verse of this narrative, God appears to Abraham and he does not seem to pay much attention to God, but rather to his guests, the rabbis deduce

that “hospitality to travelers is even greater than welcoming the *Shekhinah* - the Divine Presence.” (Shabbat 127a)

Building on this, one rabbi, Rabbah bar Huna, who lived in the fourth century in Babylonia, would begin his mealtime by publicly declaring an open invitation to strangers to join him: “*Kol dikhfin yeitei ve-yeikhul* - let all who are hungry enter and eat.”

Sound familiar?

It should. This became such an important statement and concept that it opens the *seder* - a meal that is usually full of guests.

Two thousand years ago in Jerusalem, it became customary to put a flag outside your home so that others could know you were having a meal. And children were taught to invite guests to break bread when they greeted them at the door.

Our tradition creates an entire area of Jewish law that instructs us how to greet people and how to welcome guests; one of my favorite teachings: when our guests leave, we must accompany them to the door. I always try to do this with my kids – doesn’t always work, but we try!

In medieval times, Jewish communities often created a *hevra haknasat orhim* - a unique charitable organization that instituted a system of meal tickets called *pletten* for traveling scholars and others who passed through communities.

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This notion of *haknasat orhim* does not just take place in the home, but also in the synagogue. For us here at Emunah, we have made many changes to make our shul more welcoming: we have greeters at many services (though we could use many more!). We have name tags at many services, and we try to get to know people at *kiddush*, themed *minyanim* and our special interest groups which run the gamut from cycling to Mah-jongg.

But, we can and must do more. Ron Wolfson, in his recent book, *Relational Judaism*, writes extensively about creating the atmosphere that will engender relationships between members of a community.

Recently, he wrote:

“An inviting tap on the empty chair next to me was enough. Jackie turned to her husband at their otherwise empty table, nodded yes, and got up to join us. At my request, the eight people at our auction table inched their chairs closer and our friends slid comfortably into place. Later I got an email from Jackie saying, “Thank you for welcoming us to your table. It made all the difference for our night.”

“The art of welcoming rests on a central Jewish idea: every human being is created in the image of God. When we see each other as an embodiment of Godliness, welcoming someone becomes an act of profound spirituality. Welcoming is the first step in building a relationship with another. So when (I) [we] see someone walk into a worship service or JCC, (I) [we] have a choice to make. (I) [we] can ignore the person or (I) [we] can initiate a conversation with a simple greeting of welcome. Without that crucial move there is no possibility of relationship.” (Jewels of Elul – 5773)

Many of these practices we do, but not all and certainly not always.

Relational Judaism. Let’s try it.

So, let’s take a minute right now to look around the shul. See if you can find someone you DON’T know. And I know that we usually sit with people we do know, so let’s try to make an effort to find someone else. Say hello and ask them where they are from and something about them.

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What happened? Did you play Jewish geography?

Did you meet someone new? How does it feel to meet someone new?

When I connect with someone and hear their story, it feels like a new world has been opened. I have been given a great gift - a window into a new soul, into a person that I did not know before. That always makes the world feel a little bit smaller, a little bit more connected and makes me feel more positive.

Well, far better than speaking to a neighbor for a minute on Rosh Hashanah, we have the opportunity to do this every Shabbat. Most of us wear our Emunah nametags and over *kiddush*, we have a chance to connect.

But if you really want to deepen it, you need to take that *kesher* - that connection to the next level. You need to invite people over for a meal, for a Friday night dinner. Take a chance and do it. Even or especially, someone you don't know.

We have done this in the past. We call it "Shabbat in Your Neighborhood:" simply set up meals with people in a neighborhood and we will do this again this year.

But, in the meantime, reach out and invite someone – someone from a different generation or someone you don't really know. My sister just moved to Philadelphia and she immediately received a call from a couple in their 50's inviting them for a Shabbat meal. While they are in the 30's, it mattered not. It was the feeling and the power of *hakhnasat or<sup>h</sup>im*.

Over the last few years, we have been trying to provide meals for families who have a new baby and thankfully, this is now the standard. One of the nicest aspects has been people making food not simply for people they know, but, perhaps more powerfully, for people they don't. What a great way to help and meet someone new. And then it gets paid forward.

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About 16 years ago, Sharon and I headed to Italy for our honeymoon. We spent Shabbat in Milan looking for the shul. Due to security considerations, it was not well publicized and when we got there, we were given a very full examination to make sure we were not carrying any weapons.

Once we were inside this Orthodox shul and the men saw that I could daven, I was asked to take the fourth aliyah. That is something we often do here at Emunah, as we welcome newcomers with an honor.

After services at kiddush, Sharon and I were approached and made to feel at home. We also do that fairly well at Emunah.

But then, one family asked us, "Do you have a place for *Shabbos* lunch?" We didn't. So we joined them for a lovely meal at their home. That is something that Orthodox shuls do rather well, and Conservative shuls don't.

While it may be an unrealistic expectation to be able to invite people spontaneously, we may be able to host people for meals in a slightly more planned manner. Perhaps if you have room at your table for Friday night dinner or Shabbat lunch for someone, let Rabbi Fel or me know and we can try to make a match during or after services.

The recent issue of CJ magazine discussed inviting other members for a meal. The only condition is that the guests have to do the same and host a meal for others whom they do not know or they do not know well.

In many ways, this feels like the tradition of the week of meals after a wedding. These traditional meals, called *sheva brakhot* require someone new who was not at the wedding or a previous meal. This insures that a *simhah* gets shared with an ever-widening circle. I remember when Sharon and I did this and we enjoyed the opportunity to share with many different people and groups of people.

For us here at Emunah, we should not limit ourselves to newcomers. We are a large enough community that we can make many matches amongst ourselves. But, out of those dinners, out of those conversations over a Shabbat meal, new connections, new *kesharim*, new bonds will form.

That is what Judaism has always been about. That is Relational Judaism.

People have always come to shul to see each other, to schmooze, to catch up on the week, to share with a community. And meals in people's home creates an even more intimate bond as you experience a sense of closeness in someone's home that you don't in shul.

Let's make this the year that we all make a connection with someone we don't know. That's what our tradition asks us to do and that's what the Emunah family has always been about.

*Shanah tovah!*