

Hospitality During This Season Parashat Vayera

By Rabbi Jason Miller

We learn that on the third day after Abraham had circumcised himself he hosted three angels who appeared in human form. Recovering from this procedure in the excruciating heat of the midday sun, our patriarch still urged them to receive his hospitality. Not only that, but as soon as Abraham saw these three men standing near him, he ran to greet them (*vayaratz likratam*). Not realizing these men were angles, Abraham took these strangers into his home and offered them water to wash their feet and shade to rest. With his wife Sarah's help, the guests were treated to a feast of bread and meat, curds and milk. He personally served these strangers the delicacies and attended to their needs.

In tractate Bava Metzia of the Babylonian Talmud, we find a midrash explaining that the Israelites benefit later on as a result of Abraham's kindness to these strangers:

Rab Judah teaches in Rab's name: Everything which Abraham personally did for the Ministering Angels, the Holy One Blessed be God did for God's children [the Israelites]; and whatever Abraham did through a messenger, the Holy One Blessed be God did for God's children through a messenger [Moses].

Therefore, just as Abraham ran to the herd to get a tender calf to cook for his guests, a wind from God started up and swept quail from the sea and strewed them over the camp (Numbers 11:31). Just as Abraham took butter and milk, God rained bread from heaven for the Israelites (Exodus 16:4). As Abraham stood by the guests under the tree, God stood before them upon the rock at Horeb (Exodus 17:6). And like Abraham went with them to bring them on the way, God went before the Israelites in a pillar of cloud by day (Exodus 13:21). Finally, Abraham had water fetched for the three men, and similarly God commanded Moses to strike the rock for drinking water to come out of it for the Israelites (Exodus 17:6).

Abraham's hospitality serves as a wonderful example for us all. The parsha begins with God visiting Abraham at the entrance of his tent, but as soon as the three men appear, Abraham turned away from God to attend to these guests. In so doing, he teaches us that hospitality (*hachnasat orchim*) is a significant mitzvah and value for us.

There are three fall holidays on which *hachnasat orchim* is emphasized. They are not all religious holidays, but we learn from their message nevertheless. The first of these is the pilgrimage festival of Sukkot. On these eight holy days (seven in Israel), we invite Ushpizin (Aramaic for "guests"), or distinguished individuals from our people's history, into our sukkot. Traditionally, we invite Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph, and David to join our families each night of the holiday. The more progressive and egalitarian among us include some illustrious women who made their mark on the Jewish people as well, including Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Hulda, and Esther.

In addition to these Biblical guests, it is important for us to open our sukkot to others as well, and especially to those who do not have sukkot in their own backyards and those unfamiliar with the tradition. This year, my family invited any student who wanted to join us for a barbeque on the Sunday night of Sukkot. Over seventy undergrads and graduate students, religious and secular, Jewish and non-Jewish, visited our sukkah and had the opportunity to recite the blessing of dwelling in the sukkah. I was proud to demonstrate this message of hospitality to my two-year-old son.

While the Halloween tradition is certainly a controversial one among North American Jews because of its pagan roots, there is a positive side to its celebration as well. In today's hectic times, neighbors so infrequently visit one another. The days of neighborhood kids, let alone their parents, dropping in on one another to say hello and shmooze is long gone. Yet, on Halloween, millions of children and their parents trek around the neighborhood ringing doorbells, offering greetings, and sharing candy. Ideally, this ritual

would encourage some to invite their neighbors inside their homes to visit and become acquainted. For many, the Halloween experience is quite likely the first time they see the inside of their next-door neighbors' homes. Therefore, for those who find Halloween a problematic enterprise, the opportunity for *hachnasat orchim* will hopefully serve as a positive.

Finally, the Thanksgiving holiday is inching upon us. This festive affair is an opportunity for us to gather with friends and family, consider all the good in our lives, and give thanks to God for our good fortune. It is also a time for us to consider making room at our table for strangers to join us. Opening our homes to guests on Thanksgiving is a way to share the experience with others and demonstrate our value of *hachnasat orchim*. With a mother who works in residential real-estate, our family always had strangers at our Thanksgiving dinner table. Each year, my mother would invite those clients who had recently bought new homes and relocated to Michigan and did not have family nearby. This quickly became an annual *minhag* (custom) and encouraged us to be even more grateful on Thanksgiving that we were able to celebrate together with family.

The Jewish people place much emphasis on hospitality. We marry under a chuppah that is open on all sides to remind us of the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim*. As we study the example demonstrated by our patriarch Abraham and our matriarch Sarah to welcome the stranger and make them feel at home, let us strive to be better hosts. Let us always be mindful to keep our tent doors open whether those doors are the doors of our home or the doors of our Hillel. Just as our people were rewarded because of Abraham and Sarah's genuine hospitality, may we all be rewarded with abundant blessings for making the stranger feel at home among us.