

**You Belong**  
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Shabbat Vayeira 5783

There's a story told of a family celebrating Shabbat with many guests. Everyone is clean and dressed up in their finest clothing, the food is rich and delicious, joy and laughter fill the air. In the middle of the meal, there's a knock on the door. Who could it be? No one is expected. The adults look at each other and shrug before returning to their food and conversation. Meanwhile, the host goes to open the door.

At the door, the host finds an old man, dirty and dressed in rags, wizened, and bent over.

"Shabbat shalom," the old man says. "I am a weary traveler and have nowhere to go. May I join your family tonight?"

The host is taken aback. How dare this stranger interrupt their Shabbat celebration! "There's no room for you here," the host replies and closes the door in the old man's face.

No more than thirty minutes later, there's another knock on the door. Who could it be? Surely not the beggar again! It's not. This time, at the door is a handsome, elderly gentleman, dressed in fine if wrinkled clothing.

"Shabbat shalom," he says. "I am a weary traveler and have nowhere to go. May I join your family tonight?"

The host smiles and welcomes him in. "Come in, come in. Let me take your coat and get you some food. Come join as at the table."

The stranger sits down as dishes are placed before him. Dishes heaped with food are passed to him so he can help himself. He loads his plate and settles in to eat. But instead of putting the food in his mouth, he puts a forkful of brisket right into his lapel pocket, smears the mashed potatoes across his shirt, stuffs green beans into his pants pockets, and pour gravy into his shoes.

Everyone stops and stares. "What are you doing?!" they cry.

"Well," the stranger says, "I came by earlier, dirty from my travels and dressed in rags, and you turned me away. But when I arrived in clean and fine clothes, you welcomed

me in. From that I have to understand that it wasn't *me* you welcomed into your home, but my clothes. They are the ones that you wished to feed."

With that, the prophet Elijah vanished, leaving a pile of food-stained clothes stacked on the chair.

Contrast that story with the opening of this week's parashah, Vayeira: Abraham is sitting at the entrance to his tent, at the hottest time of day, trying to catch the slightest breeze as he recovers from his circumcision. In the distance, he sees some travelers. He jumps up and runs out to greet them. He invites the travelers in to rest and refresh themselves. He washes their feet, gets a calf of the herd, calls for Sarah to make bread, and serves them food.

Abraham has no idea who these strangers are, where they are from, or where they are going. All he knows is that, in the heat of the day, in the open desert, they must be in need of water, food, and rest. So he rushes out to greet them and makes sure they feel at home. But remember, he's 90 years old and has just circumcised himself. He could easily have said, I'm hot and tired and uncomfortable and old. If they need something, they can stop by but just as well if they continue on their way. We wouldn't blame him for that. Nevertheless, he welcomes the strangers in, despite the discomfort he must have experienced. And, though he didn't expect it, the blessings he offers these strangers is returned to him with a promise that Sarah will have a child in the next year.

This synagogue, especially the original part of the building, was built to represent Abraham and Sarah's tent, a place that would be open and welcoming to all who enter. It is that sense of welcome that has brought so many people into this community—folks who have moved here from out of town, people who have come to explore and learn about Judaism and then chosen to make it their own, and non-Jews who have fallen in love with members, not to mention the children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and even great-great-grandchildren of founders. The blessing of this community is that this is not just the

home of the founders and their descendants, but that this congregation becomes the home of everyone who chooses to make it theirs.

While I was heartened in the last week by the passions and presence of so many people who care about this community, I was disappointed by the indication of some that this is a home to those who have a legacy here and that those who are newer to the community are merely guests. Guests may be welcomed or not. Family belongs.

Though I am new to community, I was invited to lead Temple Beth El as the rabbi. With that invitation, I chose to make this community my home. And trust me, I spend enough hours here that it would be easier to just sleep here too. Even though I prefer my bed at my house to the BELC kids' cots, I take very seriously the responsibility and the sense of ownership that comes with being the rabbi of this extended family. So I want to be very clear: at Temple Beth El, we are family, and you belong.

You belong here regardless of your hair color, eye color, or skin color or tone. You belong here regardless of your current age or your age when you became Jewish. You belong here regardless of your abilities or disabilities, whether you can be here onsite or you join online. You belong here regardless of your financial wherewithal or your ability to contribute to sustenance of this congregation. You belong here no matter your gender identity or sexual orientation. You belong here regardless of your family structure, whether you are single and looking, happily single, partnered, married, widowed, or divorced; whether you have young children, grown children, never wanted kids, tried and were unsuccessful, have children who have died, had an abortion, adopted children, foster children, or parent your grandchildren. You belong here no matter your politics, no matter your outlook on life, no matter your background.

Being inclusive, having an open tent, doesn't mean that we don't have boundaries or limits. We do expect everyone in our home to maintain a basic level of respect for our space and for each other. We need this home to be a safe space, both physically and emotionally. As an institution, we prioritize certain values and, while we respect those who hold or prioritize different values, we maintain our commitment to ours. We might disagree—vociferously at times—but it cannot come at the expense of each other's dignity or their

sense of belonging. We won't always be perfect at navigating the boundaries of being inclusive and maintaining our integrity, but we have to strive for both.

Ensuring that everyone in our community feels like they belong is not easy and, at times, it will make us uncomfortable. Each generation has different priorities, preferences, and expectations, and it is difficult to accommodate what everyone wants and needs. But I know that, if we are like Abraham, welcoming people in and inviting them to belong to our community, then we will be blessed just as we have been blessings. Our congregation will grow and thrive. And this will truly be our Jewish home.