

Bring a Friend, Make a Friend, Be a Friend

Kol Nidrei 5780 -2019

In the Book of Genesis there is a story about our patriarch Avraham that takes place shortly before the Torah portion we read last week on Rosh HaShanah morning. In this story, God comes to Avraham, who was called Avram at the time, and calls him into covenant. God promises that Avraham will become the father of many nations and all his descendants will be blessed. He and his wife Sarah, after years and years of barrenness, will joyfully welcome a son in the year to come - Isaac. Here is the caveat. God says: "This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you." So, Avraham circumcises his first-born son Ishmael, all the males of his household, AND himself – with a flint.

Just after this event, while Avraham is still recovering from his circumcision, he is sitting in his tent, all sides open, when off in the distance he sees three visitors approaching. Avraham springs from his seat and rushes out to greet them, offering them water, a nice foot soak, and some rest in the shade of his tree. Avraham calls out to Sarah to begin preparing bread for their guests, while he runs to the herd to choose his finest calf as well as some milk and curds. This was obviously before that "not mixing meat and dairy" thing.

From this story, our sages developed the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim*, the welcoming or inviting of guests, one of Judaism's most essential values. The Talmud teaches us that when one welcomes a

guest, it is greater than receiving *Shechinah*, the presence of God. That's how valued hospitality is in our tradition. Rabbi Yehuda Loew of Prague said, "Rising early to study Torah is the way we honor Torah, but when you welcome a guest, it is equivalent to honoring God. For when one brings a guest into their home and honors him because he was created in the image of God, then it is as if they are honoring the Divine presence, which is greater than honoring the Torah." And so our tradition is replete with stories and teachings related to the welcoming of guests into our homes.

What we do during our Passover seders? We invite Eliyahu haNavi, Elijah the prophet, to join us, and we declare, "Let all who are hungry come and eat." When we build our sukkah, as we will do right after Yom Kippur, we are to leave at least one of the walls of our sukkah open so that guests may enter. We are even supposed to invite guests from our Jewish tradition into our sukkah: seven "exalted men of Israel." Customarily we invoke their presence to our sukkah on the first night, "I invite to my meal the exalted guests Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and David." On each day of the festival we are to specifically focus on inviting one of these guests. Each of them represents being uprooted, as each of them had to leave their homes for one reason or another. Abraham was called by God to leave his father's home for a land promised to him, but one he did not know. Isaac had to leave home because of a famine. Jacob fled from his brother Esau who had threatened to kill him. Joseph was sold to traders and taken to Egypt, while Moses escaped to Midian after killing an Egyptian. David also spent time in the wilderness when he was hiding from the wrath of King Saul.

And of course, we Reform Jews include our women ancestors as well, each of whom experienced sorrow and hardship: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Miriam, Abigail (one of the wives of David), and Esther. Sarah and Rachel struggled with fertility, and Leah felt unloved and unwanted. Rebecca's favorite son Jacob had to flee for his life from his brother Esau. She greatly missed him and feared that he would be hurt or killed. Miriam in our tradition was a nurturer, a provider of an eternal spring, and a teacher and leader of the women. Taking on the care for so many others, she was surely exhausted. Abigail is forced to leave one marriage for another, and Esther risks her life by hiding her identity and asking the king to save her and her people. None of our Biblical ancestors were perfect. They carried around traumas, problems, and all kinds of baggage. When we invite others into our sukkah or our homes, we may not know all the difficulties they are facing in their lives, but our warmth and hospitality will surely make a difference in their lives. Interestingly, in some communities, it has become a custom for folks to open their sukkahs and homes only figuratively, making donations instead. This is contrary to the teaching of Maimonides, our 13th century Spanish and Egyptian commentator. Maimonides writes in his famous work *Mishneh Torah* (Laws of the Festivals 6:18) that anyone who sits comfortably with his family within his own walls and does not share with the poor is performing a *mitzvah* not for joy, but for the stomach. While giving donations is certainly appreciated, this practice prevents those who do so from connecting with others. Avraham did not offer his visitors money to help them on their journey. He went out of his way to insure

their hunger was sated, their thirst was quenched, and that they were safe and comfortable.

In his book *The Spirituality of Welcoming*, Dr. Ron Wolfson includes a teaching on this story of Avraham's hospitality. Dr. Wolfson observes that the Hebrew text of the story almost feels like it's in a hurry, using many words relating to being fast. Avraham ran (*vayaratz*), Avraham hurried (*vay'maheir*) and Avraham ran again to go fetch the calf. He ends up hurrying 3 times and rushing to fetch something four times. He even tells Sarah to hurry and make the bread. So, what do we learn from Avraham? We learn that not only should we engage in *hachnasat orchim*, the mitzvah of welcoming, but we should rush to do it and do it right now!

Dr. Wolfson also teaches that Abraham knew nothing at all about these visitors. "They could be wealthy donors and community big shots," he writes, "or they could just be beggars off the street. He has no idea they are angels..." I recall when Brian and I belonged to a synagogue early in our marriage where the rabbi often made us feel totally unseen. At the oneg Shabbat, he never talked to us, but he made sure to speak to every big *macher*. Another time, when I was in cantorial school, I had a rare Shabbat off, so we went to a congregation close by where we lived. After the service there was a receiving line. As we went through, the rabbi shook our hands, but gave no eye contact whatsoever. He was already looking at the next people in line. At the Kiddush luncheon, we sat by ourselves. Not one person – not ONE – wished us a "Gut Shabbos" or asked if we visiting. Not ONE. Were these people extreme introverts who couldn't bring themselves to speak to us? I doubt it.

Welcoming others just wasn't a priority for them. We have visited congregations in this area, too, with the same results.

Every congregation advertises themselves to the community as “warm and welcoming.” EVERY congregation. The thing is, they are warm and welcoming to their friends with whom they sit every week at the oneg. They are warm and welcoming to the people who donate to the synagogue, and they are warm and welcoming to those who look important. Congregation B'nai Chaim is a rare and beautiful exception. We are really good at what Dr. Wolfson calls “radical hospitality,” the ability to push ourselves out of our comfort zones, out of our usual circles, to extend a welcome to those we may not know.

In describing “radical hospitality,” Dr. Wolfson writes that the spirituality of welcoming elevates both the visitor and the one who has reached out to them. The guest feels their anxiety ease a bit, and the one greeting them feels that their soul has been uplifted. He considers this interaction to be an “offering of oneself, and an invitation for connection between human and human, and in that meeting, between human and God.”

“The first step in transforming a congregation into a sacred community,” writes Dr. Wolfson, is to create an ambiance that overflows with the spirituality of welcoming, with radical hospitality.” Why is hospitality so important for our synagogues? Wolfson says, “We live in a time and culture that seems to work against the very thing we hope to create: a synagogue of relationships. Relationships begin with a greeting – a handshake, a smile, a good word.” And, as I stated on Rosh HaShanah, we must SEE others.

When someone is at a table alone, or their family is sitting alone, I cringe in horror, for I have been there way too many times. It is a terrible feeling to be by yourself while everyone else is conversing and laughing, and we must never, ever allow that to happen. Anytime you see a family or visitor alone, please make sure they do not remain alone. Go sit next to them. Introduce yourself. Ask if they need anything. Bring over someone else to meet them. We must always be willing to expand the circle of who is “us.”

This year the Board of Directors and I have decided to focus on this theme: Bring a Friend, Make a Friend, Be a Friend. Community is so important. There are so many Jews out there who don't know where to find a community or even if they WANT to find a community. They need us, and we need them. Our future as a place for Jews to gather, learn, and pray in the southwest area depends upon it. Do you know anyone who may be interested in being a part of our loving community? Invite them to come to services or to visit religious school, and show them how important it is to you by coming with them! Bring a friend.

Though our congregation is small and it's much easier to get to know one another, sometimes we just don't. There is a services-going group and a religious school group and an “I come on yahrzeit” group, and rarely does the twain meet. Let's see what we can do to change that. Everyone is always welcome to most every event. I say “most every event” because you probably don't want to invite children to Sippin' in the Sukkah, Wine and Dine, or Purim Pour 'Em because, well, there are adult beverages. That being said, even if an event is geared towards children and families like Polar Bear Shabbat,

the Purim Carnival, the Tu BiSh'vat seder, or Fun in the Sukkah with S'mores, that does not mean that adults are not welcomed. You'd be surprised at how much fun we adults can have at youth-oriented events. Don't you love being read to or playing little instruments and singing little songs? I do! So, this year, try out one of our classes, try Mah Jongg, hang out at religious school, come to our Sunday morning services with the kids. We have lots of fun, and there is always some adult humor thrown in. How about reaching out to someone in our temple community, someone you don't know very well or who is new, and invite them over for a Shabbat meal or ask them to join you at a Shabbat service and go out for dinner, coffee, or drinks with you afterward. You can even go to our website (bnaichaim.org), login, download the membership list, and find a name you're not familiar with. Then call them and ask them if you can get to know them by meeting them for tea or having them over for dinner sometime. You could invite them to come to Shabbat services so that you can sit together and get to know one another. Of course, there are millions of excuses for why we can't, but when one doesn't feel connected to the community, they have a lesser and lesser desire to be a part of it. People don't join synagogues because the rabbi is amazing, the cantor is spectacular, or the educator is a marvel. They don't. People join because they feel welcomed or their friends are here. Bring a friend, make a friend.

Bringing a friend is important. Making a friend is important. Most important, though, is being a friend. The reason for developing a spiritual community is not to have a place to be comfortable with a few friends or to see a few folks we know and like.

The purpose for creating a spiritual community is to build relationships that are sturdy and lasting enough to bind us together when times are hard, when anti-Semitism threatens us, when loss touches us. We need a strong community in order to practice building more and more relationships like that, until all people feel like they are part of something and that they mean something. Being welcoming is not just a goal or a thing we do or a way to describe ourselves. Being a welcoming congregation is a continuous process – a practice, like yoga or meditation or exercise. It's work – hard work, but we must make everyone feel like they belong, they are needed, and they are worthy. Did you hear someone's name on the Mi Shebeirach list? Call them and check on them. Haven't seen a congregant in a while? Send them a little note or email that you miss them. Little things mean a lot, as they say. Together we can grow and sustain deep relationships and thus, our congregation. Bring a friend. Run like Avraham. Make a friend. Invite them over to your tent. Be a friend. Feed them, give them some water, make them feel important.

G'mar chatimah tovah! May you be sealed for a good year!
And I look forward to meeting your friends!