

SHABBAT SHALOM

INSIGHTS INTO LIFE, PERSONAL GROWTH & TORAH



PARSHAT PINCHAS

DEDICATED WITH DEEP APPRECIATION TO **MARC SCHERR.**

GOOD MORNING! Last week a reader living in Israel wrote to me that his married daughter and her family were coming to Miami for a visit and he wondered if there were any community resources for guest accommodations that could be made available to them while visiting South Florida. This is not an unusual request.

Most cities with large Orthodox communities have established guest accommodation “systems” within the communal infrastructure. There are several reasons for this.

As Orthodox Jews cannot drive on Shabbat, they have to walk to synagogue to participate in family and communal celebrations. Many, if not most, large cities (Toronto, Lakewood, Baltimore, etc.) do not have “walkable” hotel accommodations in the residential parts of the city. Thus, many families in those cities have converted their basements (or attics) into very comfortable and totally separate complimentary guest lodgings.

Hosting guests or “hachnassat orchim” is a time treasured value of the Jewish people. We find this exemplified by our patriarch Abraham who, after his circumcision, was visited by the Almighty who came to check on him. Suddenly, Abraham saw three strangers coming down the road in the blistering heat of the day. He immediately took leave of the Almighty and went to inquire as to their welfare and invite them into his home to eat, drink, and refresh themselves before continuing on their journey.

On the face of it, this seems very strange. If the main purpose of doing mitzvot – like hosting guests – is to build a relationship with God, then how can Abraham possibly leave the presence of God to attend to other guests?

The answer is that we learn this value of taking guests into your home from the Almighty Himself. God created the world as a home for mankind. In Kabbalistic terms, God carved out a space within His immanence in order for the world to exist – thus creating an illusion of a place in which God’s immanence is not palpable and overt (this is why in Hebrew the word for “world – olam” has the same root as the Hebrew word for vanished).

The Talmud says that of all the creatures He created, man was created last because God wanted him to come into a world that was totally prepared for him; a world that could provide for all his needs. This is an allusion to how one should treat guests. A host should be sensitive to the fact that it is very uncomfortable for a guest to ask for

anything, and therefore a host should endeavor to provide whatever he can so that a guest does not have to ask for anything.

The reason Abraham leaves the presence of the Almighty to welcome guests is because emulating the Almighty – i.e. becoming a host – is of an even higher value than conversing with the Almighty. By emulating Him one becomes God-like, which is the ultimate statement of the relationship. In this week's Torah reading our sages find another allusion as to the proper way to treat guests in one's home.

The Torah discusses the different sacrifices that were brought to the Temple on each one of the holidays. For the holiday of Sukkot, there is a curious procedure relating to the number of sacrifices that are brought; every succeeding day one less bull is brought as a sacrifice. So, on the first day of the holiday thirteen bulls are brought to the altar, on the second day twelve bulls, on the third day eleven bulls, and so on for the entire seven-day holiday period.

The great medieval commentator known as Rashi quotes a rather unusual teaching sourced from the Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 21:25): "The Torah is teaching us how to properly conduct ourselves. On the first day one has a guest in his home he should prepare for him stuffed fowl. On the next day he should feed him fish. The following day he should serve him meat. The day after that he should give him a bean dish. On the next day he gives him vegetables [...]. He progressively decreases (every day) just like the bulls of the holiday of Sukkot."

This is difficult to understand; surely the Midrash isn't telling us that the proper way to treat guests is to make them feel less welcome each succeeding day that we are hosting them! This would be somewhat reminiscent of Benjamin Franklin's famous aphorism in his Poor Richard's Almanack; "Guests, like fish, begin to smell after three days." While there is an undeniable truth to that observation, this is difficult to accept as the proper Jewish way to treat guests.

Additionally, as some commentators point out, meat, which is to be served on day 3 is more expensive than fish (day 2) or fowl (day 1). In other words, if you follow this menu, some of the succeeding days are more expensive than the prior days. So, in what manner exactly is the host progressively decreasing?

The difficulty for most people who are guests in someone else's home is the uncomfortable feeling of imposing on their personal space. As the Talmud (Brachos 58b) explains, "The proper guest says, 'Everything that the host has toiled for he has toiled for me.'" In other words, a thoughtful guest is very sensitive to the efforts expended by the host.

There are two ways for a host to compensate for this and to try to put his guests at ease. The first is to make the guest feel as though the host is honored to have them and the second is to make them feel as if it is no imposition at all. Our sages are teaching us that we must do both. The proposed menu for a guest is not organized in a declining order of expense, rather it is a declining order of difficulty of preparation.

On the first day the host goes out of his way to prepare a very fancy meal of stuffed fowl – as anyone who has ever prepared a Thanksgiving dinner can tell you, this requires a

very high degree of preparation. The second day is fish, which is very delicate and needs to be seasoned and cooked very carefully, though it isn't as much preparation time as the first day. The third day is meat, which requires an even lesser amount of expertise and cooking technique (after all, every man is a grill master – apparently it's in his DNA). The next day is a bean soup, which is simple fare and even easier to prepare, etc. On the first day, the host prepares an elaborate meal to express his delight at having the guest. A host should want to make his guests feel special and like their presence is a special occasion. Preparing an elevated meal highlights the occasion.

As the days progress guests begin to grapple with the feeling that they are encroaching into their host's space. Let's face it, when we have guests in our home we even interact with family members differently and are generally on our best behavior at all times. This is not always easy – after all, not yelling at our kids can take a toll. Thus, a sensitive host makes every effort to have guests feel at ease and welcome.

Therefore, the host slowly begins to lessen his efforts in order to make the guest feel less catered to and more at home. The host's goal at this point is to show the guest that their presence is really no imposition at all and that the guest is welcome to stay as long as he wants as part of the family. That is the highest level of welcoming guests into one's home.

This is the message the sages are communicating by telling us to progressively lessen each day. The proper way of making guests feel comfortable in your home is to make an effort to have them feel less like a guest and more like part of the family.

On a related note, I once heard my father instructing his students on another aspect of how to properly welcome guests into one's home.

Most guests, whether coming for a meal or coming to stay with you for the weekend, bring some kind of gift. The natural reaction that most of us have is to tell our guests some version of "I am so happy you came, but you shouldn't have" or "You didn't have to bring anything." "This," my father said, "is a terrible mistake."

It is a well-known life maxim that givers are much happier than takers. The reason for this is not only the self-satisfaction of helping others; it is that in the dynamics of a relationship a giver is in control and the taker is constantly in wait for the other's largesse. This is why people who are "takers" are always miserable – there is a continual frustration in the constant waiting and not being in control of the relationship.

My father went on to explain to his students that when a guest brings you a gift this is a unique opportunity to make them feel like a giver. "Being in someone else's home puts a guest on the receiving end of kindness. When a guest brings a gift, you have the opportunity to make them feel like a giver. Thus, the proper thing to say is, 'This bottle of wine is perfect. I am so happy that you brought it!' or 'I have been looking for another tablecloth. I love it! Thank you so much!'"

Thus, the greatest kindness we can give our guests is to make them feel not like takers, but rather like givers.

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SHABBAT SHALOM,



Yitzchak Zweig
Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

Torah Portion: Pinchas, Numbers 25:10 – 30:1

In last week's Torah portion, Pinchas acted to stop a public display of immorality. He thus stemmed the plague of retribution that was killing the multitudes. He is rewarded by being made a Cohen by Divine decree.

The Almighty commands Moses to attack the Midianites in retribution for the licentious plot the Midianites perpetrated upon the Israelites. A new census is taken of the Jewish people revealing that there are 601,730 men available for army duty. God directs the division of the Land of Israel amongst the tribes. The Levites are tallied. The daughters of Tzelafchad come forward to petition Moses regarding their right of inheritance. Moses inquires of the Almighty, Who answers in their favor.

Moses asks the Almighty to appoint a successor and the Almighty directs Moses to designate Joshua (Yehoshua). The Torah portion concludes with the various offerings – daily, Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh (new month), and holidays.

SHABBAT LIGHTING: Jerusalem 7:08 | Miami 7:55 | Cape Town 5:39 | Guatemala 6:16 | Hong Kong 6:52 | Honolulu 6:57 | Johannesburg 5:16 | Los Angeles 7:45 | London 8:52 | Melbourne 5:03 | Mexico 6:59 | Moscow 8:41 | New York 8:05 | Singapore 6:58 | Toronto 8:36

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

“EVERY HOUSEGUEST BRINGS YOU HAPPINESS. SOME WHEN THEY ARRIVE AND SOME WHEN THEY LEAVE.” – CONFUCIUS



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