

Welcoming Synagogue : Excerpts

What Does Jewish Tradition Teach Us About Hospitality?

Greeting Guests: The Model of Abraham and Sarah

The first step in transforming a congregation into a sacred community is to create an ambience that overflows with the spirituality of *welcoming*, with **radical hospitality**. In the classical Jewish texts, the mitzvah of *hachnnsat orchim*, the welcoming of guests, is ranked among the most important spiritual imperatives in Judaism.

Read carefully this text from Genesis about Abraham and Sarah:

The Lord appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot. Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground, he said, "My lords, if it please you, do not go on past your servant. Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree. And let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves; then go on-seeing that you have come your servant's way." They replied, "Do as you have said." Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Quick, three seahs of choice flour! Knead and make cakes!" Then Abraham ran to the herd, took a calf, tender and choice, and gave it to a servant-boy, who hastened to prepare it. He took curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared and set these before them; and he waited on them under the tree as they ate.

-Genesis 78:1-8

This is a text in a hurry. Look at the words used to describe Abraham's actions: he *ran*, *he hastened*, he *ran* again. The Hebrew verbs are even more dramatic: *vayaratz*, *vayimheir*; *mahari*! The word for "run" is used twice. "rushed" three times, and "fetch" four times. The biblical commentators have a field day with the story. What was Abraham doing as he sat in the heat of the day at the entrance of his tent? The medieval commentator Rashi points out that he was healing; after all, at the conclusion of the previous chapter, Abraham circumcised himself at the age of ninety-nine! Another commentator suggests that Abraham was engaged in the morning prayers. And yet, when the three strangers come into view; Abraham overcomes his pain, interrupts his worship, and rushes to greet them.

Moreover, Abraham does not know anything at all about the strangers. They could be wealthy donors and community big shots, or they could just be beggars off the

street. He has no idea that they are angels of God sent to visit the sick and to announce to Abraham and Sarah that they will, at long last, become parents. To Abraham, they were sojourners in need of respite and he implored them to enjoy the hospitality of his and Sarah's tent. From this example, the Talmud teaches this remarkable lesson: "*Hachnasat orchim*, welcoming strangers, is a greater mitzvah than welcoming the *Shechinah*, God's presence" (*Shabbat* 127a).

The spirituality of welcoming elevates both the guest and the host. A warm greeting eases the unspoken anxiety a guest feels at being a stranger and immediately answers the first question anyone in a strange place asks: Will I be welcome here? For the host, the act of hospitality is a gesture of spiritual generosity, uplifting the soul. It is an offering of oneself, an invitation for connection between human and human and, in that meeting, between human and God.

In the Image of God

The spirituality of welcome is rooted in a core value of Judaism that is expressed in the very first chapter of the Bible

*And God said: "Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness"....
And God created humankind in God's image; male and female God created them.*

-Genesis 1:26-28

This is a stunning statement: *Every human being is made in the image of God.*

From this core value, we discover the ultimate purpose of a congregation. **The task of a spiritual community is to help each human being made in the image of God recapture the knowledge of how to live a life filled with godliness, a life committed to becoming a partner with God in doing the ongoing work of creation and repair of the world.**

Creating a culture in which every person who crosses the threshold of the congregation is treated as an image of God is the fundamental reason to become an enthusiastic practitioner of the spirituality of welcoming.

The synagogue can be a sacred community that offers everyone who steps into its midst a welcome infused with spirituality-with meaning, purpose, connection, and the presence of the Divine. For the core members of the congregation-the regulars and the leadership-the task of creating a community of welcome through the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim*, the welcoming of guests, is filled with meaning and purpose. For the newcomer, encountering a warm welcome offers connectedness to

community imbued with the presence of God—a sacred community. To create such a community requires an intention to transform the culture of the congregation into one in which the welcoming ambience is tangible, palpable, and unmistakable in every aspect of congregational life.

Embracing the Stranger

The Torah teaches the importance of loving strangers and treating them like our own people:

So you are to love the sojourner, for sojourners were you in the land of Egypt.

Deuteronomy 10:19

Here is a true story from Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the senior rabbi of Westchester Reform Temple in New York:

She was a little old lady in ragged clothes who came every day to the synagogue, probably because she had no place else to go. Her name was Ina, but most people didn't know that. She almost never spoke to anyone, preferring her privacy. People in the congregation hardly had a relationship with her, yet most would smile at her and wish her a Shabbat Shalom, even if there was never a return greeting. We thought she must have had some sort of mental illness or social insecurity. Each week, I would welcome her to the synagogue. She paid some dues to maintain her membership, but the way she dressed and acted, no one ever thought she was a person of means.

When she died, I officiated at the funeral. There was no family to sit shivah. There were no memorial plaques. I thought I would never hear of her again. Yet one day, about two months after her death, I received a phone call out of the blue.

"Rabbi Jacobs? This is Sam Adler, Ina's attorney. As you know, Ina was not one to talk much. I didn't know her well myself. But it turns out she had accumulated a substantial portfolio of stocks. She has left your congregation a bequest of \$750,000. Why? She always felt welcomed at your synagogue."

We never know everything about everyone who comes through our doors, but we are obligated to welcome all who enter.

If Judaism is to flourish, if synagogues are to become spiritual centers for many more Jews, then we must become passionate about opening our doors, encouraging people to come in, and welcoming them once they step across our threshold, without preconceived ideas about what they should or should not be.

During extensive visits to synagogues throughout North America, we found many who seemed to be doing well; in fact, some were becoming quite large. Yet, sheer numbers of members is not a reliable indication of success. As one rabbi of a major

metropolitan synagogue that serves more than a thousand family units told us in a brutally honest moment: "My synagogue is full, but empty"

What the rabbi meant to imply was that though the four thousand individuals who belonged to his synagogue came in droves to the many programs that the institution offered; though the large campus was crowded with people, mostly children who were dropped off in carpool lines that snaked across the expansive parking lot; though the weekly Bar or Bat Mitzvah service attracted hundreds, most of whom were guests of the family celebrating the *simcha* (happy occasion); though there was a very small core of regulars who attended everything and who could be counted on to help out the large professional staff; though it was a place full of activity for virtually every age group, it **nevertheless was "empty" of spiritual significance in the lives of most of its members.**

This kind of synagogue has been described as a "limited-liability" community. There is a tacit understanding between the institution and the members.

For the members, it goes something like this: "We pay you a lee [dues] for services rendered. We expect a religious school for our children, a rabbi on call when we need her or him, and seats for the High Holy Days. Other than that, we expect you to offer programs that may or may not attract our attendance, because, after all, we are very, very busy people and synagogue is not exactly our top priority. We like the fact that you are there when we need you, but don't expect or exact too much more of a commitment from us."

For the professional staff and leadership, it goes something like this: "We depend on attracting enough members to pay dues to cover our expenses—professional salaries, building maintenance, and program costs. We will provide the basic functions of a synagogue; religious school; access to rabbis, Bar or Bat Mitzvah training; High Holy Day, weekly, and, where applicable, daily religious services; and lots and lots of programs. Heaven help us if more than a small percentage of people actually want to engage the professional staff on a more intensive basis, because frankly, we don't have the time."

The synagogue that developed in the twentieth century is good at serving its small core of regulars and an ever-changing group of families who join primarily to have their children receive some form of Jewish education and become Bar or Bat Mitzvah. The regulars somehow (often due to consistent attendance at worship services or by volunteering in leadership roles) find their way into a committed relationship with the congregation; the majority of members do not.

Thus, the first obstacle to overcome is this: The synagogue itself—especially its spiritual and lay leadership—will need to accept the challenge of welcoming all who come within its orbit and become a synagogue of relationships.

This will require far more than an increased number of programs. Synagogues can have the appearance of success by sending flier after flier in an attempt to attract attendance; we call these congregations "frequent-flier synagogues." It is not rocket science to offer interesting and varied programs, and often the programs do bring more people into the building. That is a good thing, but it is nowhere near sufficient in creating the kind of sacred community that is envisioned here.

Ask yourself this question: Why is it that so many individuals and families affiliate with synagogues at one time or another in their lives but then move to the periphery of the congregation or leave altogether? Certainly, there are a variety of reasons, but if you unpack the usual reasons given, the **bottom line is that most synagogues fail to establish a connection between the individual and the congregation that is so valuable, so meaningful that it would be unthinkable to sever it. This is the most serious indictment of the twentieth century-synagogue model.**

The relationship between synagogue and individual is limited. And the result is that many congregations have a revolving door in the main entrance, with members both coming and leaving.

Leaders of synagogues rarely asked the deep questions of purpose: Why synagogue? What does synagogue do for people? What constitutes success in synagogue life?

Why Is Hospitality So Important for Synagogues?

We live in a time and a culture that seems to work against the very thing we hope to create: a synagogue of relationships. Relationships begin with a sincere greeting—a handshake, a smile, and a good word. Radical hospitality is the way to open the door to the possibility of spirituality.

We are in danger of losing the art of hospitality. We don't welcome strangers anymore—we are afraid of them. We don't invite people to our homes anymore—we entertain at restaurants or clubs. We don't greet people on the street—we avoid them. We don't even answer our phones without first checking caller ID to see if it is someone we know or want to talk with. What is happening to us? When we lose the art of hospitality we lose a part of our souls. For kindness to others is not simply an imperative to improve the lives of those who seek welcome. The act of 'hospitality improves the lives of those who offer it. Welcoming, serving, and feeding others embody the value of generosity of spirit, of sharing what we have, of caring for others when they are in need.

The spirituality of welcoming begins with radical hospitality that brings *people* closer to each other, to community to Judaism, and to God. The spiritually

welcoming congregation has two objectives : outreach and inreach. We need to open our doors wide, put out the welcome mat, invite in the stranger, and extend hospitality to all who enter, to bring them closer to our spiritual communities. And we need to encourage our current congregation members to move from peripheral or occasional involvement into a deeper relationship With each other, With the community with Judaism, and with God.

All too often, we fail at both of these tasks. We do not put out the welcome mat to the stranger, nor do we do enough to deepen the relationships, we already have. Only- to the regulars does the synagogue seem very friendly. For them, it is. They recognize each other, know each other, kiss each other Good *Shabbes*, and invite each other over for lunch. They are friendly to the people already there! The guests experience this as insular and off-putting. Some people in synagogues like it this way. They don't want the synagogue community to be too big; they like the intimacy of a small group. And, after all, integrating new people into an existing group is one of the more difficult challenges in social engineering. But this aversion to guests can keep a synagogue from growing.

The regulars have also forgotten what it feels like to enter an unfamiliar synagogue

Rethinking Membership

The transformation of a congregation into a sacred community begins with creating a welcoming ambience imbued with radical hospitality and welcoming worship that is spiritually uplifting. Done well, the congregation is poised to concentrate on the next step: encouraging seekers and guests to consider affiliation with the sacred community-welcoming membership. Then, once a person joins the congregation, establishing a meaningful connection between the individual and the community poses another significant challenge.

In the twentieth-century synagogue, "membership" became the economic model of congregations. This required attracting a number of individuals and family units willing to pay dues in order to receive the services of the organization: worship experiences, religious school, adult education, and attention from the clergy. The result was congregations of various sizes, almost all based on a fee-for-service relationship with the member in the context of a Limited-liability community.

As mentioned earlier, the entrance of many synagogues is a revolving door. Each year, a number of new members come in and a number of members leave. Often, these numbers even out, resulting in no growth whatsoever. We know why people join; most members sign up when they need the services the congregation offers. We need to ask the tough question: Why do members quit?

The answer should not be a surprise. People leave synagogues when they no longer need the services they signed up for in the first place. There is no reliable research on this topic, but an informal, anecdotal survey reveals that most members who quit do so shortly after their youngest child becomes a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. The failure to engage the adults in a serious relationship with the congregation is the most serious indictment of the synagogue of the twentieth century:

This is maddening. Many parents of young children look to join a synagogue in order to ensure their children get a Jewish education. Some families sign up if the synagogue offers a preschool; others join when the oldest child reaches the age of eight or so. Assuming a family with two children, spaced several years apart, the synagogue will likely have the membership "unit" in the congregation for at least twelve to fifteen years. The question we usually hear is, How can we keep the kids involved in the synagogue after the Bar or Bat Mitzvah? But I am asking, What can we do during the twelve to fifteen years of membership to ensure that the parents continue their affiliation with the congregation?

This will require a complete rethinking of every aspect of what it means to belong to a congregation. To do this thinking, synagogue leaders need to do something quite radical: analyze the entire experience of membership—from shul-shopping to joining a congregation to connecting with each person in a meaningful way—from the point of view of the prospective member, not from the point of view of the synagogue office.

While it is of course important to recruit new members, I am as concerned with deepening the relationship between the members we already *have* as I am with recruiting new members into our congregations. We must think carefully about how to do inreach even as we develop strategies for outreach. Otherwise, the door will keep on revolving and neither our congregations nor our members will grow, physically or spiritually.

Rethinking the Purpose of Synagogue

What is the purpose of a synagogue? What is it in business to do?

If the answer to this question is to provide a religious school for children, a place to pray, and a rabbi on call, then most of the synagogues of the twentieth century serve these purposes well.

If, however, the purpose of a synagogue is to be a sacred community of people whose lives are enriched with meaning, purpose, connectedness, and a relationship with God through prayer, study; acts of social justice, healing, and loving-kindness, then we must redefine what it means to be a member of a synagogue in the twenty-first century.

Our goal can be simply stated, though it is challenging to achieve: to transform "membership" into a covenantal relationship between the individual and the spiritual community and to deepen the commitment of the member to the community; to Judaism, and to God.

Most synagogue membership can be categorized by their level of commitment. Typically we think of the regulars, those for whom the congregation is like a second home; the involved, those who have some contact with the congregation through attendance at services or programs and serving as leaders (at least for a while) or volunteers; and the peripherals, the members who come for the High Holy Days, when they are invited to an event or a celebration, or to say *Kaddish* for loved ones.

The synagogue leadership, drawn from the ranks of regulars or involved members, often think of the congregation from inside out. Once inside, it is difficult to remember what it felt like to be new or on the periphery. And yet that is precisely where we need to start our exploration of how the process of deepening membership might happen.

Circles of Commitment: A Model for Thinking about Membership

In the twenty-first-century synagogue—a synagogue that wants to reach spiritual seekers and grow the Jewish people—the old model of membership is turned on its head. The most important group is the *outer* circle, not the inner circle. It is the task of the core of the inner circle to consider the outer circle as essential, not peripheral, to the future of the congregation..