



**RABBI AARON**

Editor, Torah Tidbits

**GOLDSCHIEDER**

# The Giving Jew

The Almighty's visit to Avraham takes place when Avraham is seated at the entrance of his tent. Avraham, as is well known, is at this location seeking out travelers he can potentially invite into his tent. An intriguing scene now unfolds: Avraham was basking in the aura of the Divine Presence when suddenly he noticed three travelers who he did not know. What was Avraham supposed to do?

According to one reading in the Talmud (*Shavuot 35b*) Avraham turned to God and said, "My Lord, please wait for me for now I have to attend to the travelers; *"A-donai*, if only I have found favor in your eyes, do not pass on from beside your servant" (18:3). Then he turned around and addressed the travelers. "Please let a little water be taken and bathe your feet" (18:4).

This incident prompted the Sages to deduce a memorable lesson: To receive lonely travelers on a hot day and give water to wash and give them food is greater than being in the presence of the Almighty (*Shabbat 127a*) (Mesorat Harav p.117).

We know that the mitzvah of hospitality is most precious to the Jew. It is rooted in our collective souls from the beginning of our history, as early as Avraham and Sarah

who distinguished themselves in opening their homes to strangers.

Inviting those who are in need activates a key virtue which permeates the Jewish heart: *chesed*, kindness, expressed namely through the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim*, hospitality.

Rabbi Soloveitchik highlighted five aspects of the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim* which imbue it with special significance:

## 1. It is Difficult and Uncomfortable

We allow a stranger into our home. We may find that the mannerism of our guest is odd. He intrudes on our privacy, both in a physical sense and emotionally as well. At times, having a guest means that we sacrifice a part of our own comfort or our own privacy and private time which is not easy to give up.<sup>1</sup>

In this vein, there is another another challenge when we open our homes to guests. Namely, we may find that the guest's opinions may be different than ours. The quality of welcoming strangers into one's home reflects a spiritually noble attitude to others. It reflects humility; that a Jew feels far from perfection, that others can teach him something new. There is an

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<sup>1</sup> Lustiger, *Chumash Mesorat HaRav, Bereshit*, 2012, p.169

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openness to learn from others. The Rav taught: When a Jew is convinced of his own righteousness, of his own scholarship and wisdom, he will be hesitant to perform the mitzvah of welcoming guests, for in his mind he is convinced that they have nothing more to teach him.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Lightening the Burden of Others

Avraham, from whom we learn this mitzvah, experienced in his own life what it feels like not to have a home. He was a wanderer for many years of his life. He knew what it is like to come to the end of the day not knowing his next destination. He knew first hand what it felt like to sleep on the ground on a freezing cold

night; to be lost in a strange land. This intense experience taught Avraham and his descendants to feel for the stranger and have compassion for those who are in need, "I will open my home for those who need a warm meal and comfortable bed.

This teaching is a critical lesson learned from our national experience and in particular from our enslavement in Egypt. We as a people felt the pain of being a stranger and being homeless, therefore knowing what this pain feels like, we will share in the distress of others. We will lighten the burden of others who suffer as much as we possibly can.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Joseph B. Solovetichik, *Five Addresses*, p.159

<sup>3</sup> *The Night That Unites*, p.95; Lustiger, *Chumash Mesorat HaRav, Shemot, 2014*, p.59

A commandment repeated in various formulations thirty six times in the Torah is mentioned more often than any other mitzvah: “You shall not oppress the stranger, since you yourself know the feeling of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 23:9). The Rav suggested that we, the Jewish people, had to experience 210 years of slavery, because it was critical in molding our national personality into one of compassion and concern for our fellow man.

### 3. “My Home is My Castle”

The Rav argued for the supremacy of the mitzvah of hospitality based on the fact that the Torah *rejects* the doctrine of “my home is my castle.” This doctrine conveys two illusory ideas: first that the home gives ample protection and shields us in times of crises. We know that this is not the case. Second, that our home is our property and that no one else can claim a share in it. This assertion is also false. Man is vulnerable. One is never fully protected. Man neither has a home nor a castle. When man shares his home with others he expresses the awareness that he is just a ‘tenant’; his home is his to be used for good and to help provide for others who may be in need.

A remarkable example of this, says the Rav, is when the Jewish people partook of the paschal lamb in Egypt and a new fellowship was formed. In contrast to the selfish and survival mode that they embodied as slaves, they began to share their lives with one another: “...then *he and his neighbor* who is nearest to his house shall take one according to the

number of people...” (Exodus 12:4). The Rav writes, “The slave spontaneously did something he would never have believed he was capable of doing; he knocked on the door of his neighbor, whom he had never noticed, inviting him to share the lamb with him and eat together. No wonder our Seder commences with the declaration ‘*Ha Lachma Anya*’, by which we invite others to join us.”<sup>4</sup>

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### 4. The Dignity of Every Man

Every individual is endowed with *Tzelem Elokim*, the divine image. The importance of *hachnasat orchim* is emphasized because it reflects appreciating each individual not only as a fellow human but as a unique being before God.

The Rav once commented that the name of the book of *Shemot*, literally, ‘Names’, is significant as it suggests the importance of every individual. A name signifies uniqueness.

Strikingly, the Ten Commandments were addressed not in the plural but in the singular, to emphasize that God relates not only to the collective but to the individual as well.

*Rashi*, in the opening verse of Exodus (1:1), compares the counting of the children of Israel to the stars in the sky and quotes

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p.87

the verse, “He brings out and counts His heavenly hosts (Isaiah 40:26).” Each star is part of a universe, yet each star is numbered, named and accounted for individually by God. Similarly, we also need to view each individual as a singular ‘star’, recognizing each person’s uniqueness, divine spark and eternal value.<sup>5</sup>

To open one’s home to another is to be conscious of *kavod habriyot*; it is a reflection that one is aware of the dignity and Divine spark found within every human being.

## 5. The Almighty is the Great *Machnis Orchim*

Rabbi Soloveitchik taught that it is God’s hospitality that allows the world to come into being and allow for humanity to exist. The Almighty, like Avraham, invites people to partake of His boundless existence. ‘Creation is an act of *hachnasat orchim*’; God invites us to share this world with Him.

The Jewish mystics asked: Why did God create the world? Does God, the Almighty, infinite, eternal, omniscient and transcendent, need a frail, finite, transient world? Yes, they said, he needs the world in order to have another on whom to bestow kindness and mercy. To let someone share in the great I-awareness of being. To give love and bestow *chesed*.<sup>6</sup>

The Rav referred to the Kabbalistic notion of *tzimtzum* - contraction. God practices

“self-limitation’, ‘self control’; by limiting the infinite in the process of creation, God makes room for the world to come into being. “By creating the world in general, and man in particular, God surrendered His aloneness and allowed a physical universe to share in His infinite being...He allowed something else to share with him what had been exclusively His own.”<sup>7</sup>

*The Almighty is the great Machnis Orchim.* When we open our homes to others, we participate in an act that resembles God’s ways; the Jew emulates God’s and also practices *tzimtzum*.

A central motif in Judaism may be captured best in two words: *vehalachta bi’drechav, to walk in His ways*. This means that we are summoned to live our lives emulating God’s attributes and conduct.<sup>8</sup> When we open our homes to others we also *contract* and make space for others. When we discipline ourselves to withdraw and share our space with others, this is an essential part of our service to the Almighty.<sup>9</sup> In practicing compassion and kindness we come close to our most Godly selves. ■

7 Clark, Wolowelsky, and Ziegler ed., *Days of Deliverance*, 2001, p.109

8 Rakeffet, *The Rav*, 1991 p. 7-9; Schachter, *Nefesh HaRav*, 1994, p.72

9 Lustiger, *Chumash Mesorat HaRav, Bereshit*, 2012, p. 203

5 *Ibid*, 2014, p.3

6 Lustiger, *Chumash Mesorat HaRav, Bereshit*, 2012, p. 225

**Dr. Eliezer Rosenblum**

NYS Licensed and Board Certified

**Chiropractor**

Offices in Jerusalem, Ramat Beit Shemesh

**052-662-4658**