

# Welcoming guests: Have we Jews lost this ancient skill?

## THE RABBI'S TURN

### RABBI ARTHUR GREEN

Here it is, late one night during the intermediate days of Sukkot. Some 40 people have just left our sukkah after a reception for a new program we initiated at our college. Last night we had about 15 for dinner; for tomorrow night the count is up near 20.

The truth is that we hardly keep count this week. When everybody we think we invited seems to be present, we do a head count and then go out to set the table. Thank God, at least, that paper plates seem appropriate to outdoor eating!

This is a special season for practicing the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim* or welcoming guests. While every Shabbat is a time for guests in a Jewish home, the holidays of Pesach and Sukkot seem especially dedicated to this practice. On each we have a ritual formula to remind us of guests and their importance.

On both of these holidays we are said to have special "spiritual guests" who abide with us — Elijah on Pesach and the "seven shepherds" on Sukkot — to remind us of our earthly guests, especially the poor, and of our obligation to them.

The welcoming of guests is one of the most distinctive virtues of the traditional Jewish community. I remember how impressed I was, as a college student, going to a Boston shul where I was a complete stranger and being invited home by someone for each meal.

It seemed that these very special people expected, and even sought out, such guests. There were always extra places at the table, lots of good if simple food, and warm, friendly conversation.

I fondly recall my early visits to Jerusalem, in the days before most people had phones. It was understood that it was all right on Shabbat afternoon to drop in on practically anybody, even if you knew them only slightly. It seemed as though the whole city divided itself up between the visited and the visiting, and you just felt out by instinct which role you were to play on any given week.

I fear that too many Jews have lost this sense of informal and spontaneous welcoming of guests. The "throw another carrot in the soup" ethic has given way to elaborately planned menus and carefully reviewed guest lists for our cocktail receptions or "dinner parties."

These events, of course, are highly ritualized in their own way, but with rituals that have neither the religious depth nor the welcoming warmth of the traditional Jewish home. It is time for us to reclaim Shabbat and Yom Tov as the natural time for inviting guests, and to remember that the rewards of this mitzvah go to those who open their hearts and homes, as

well as to the visitors.

In thinking about *hachnasat orchim* as opposed to "entertaining," we should of course think beyond our immediate circle of friends. Who is there in our community who could use an invitation? A new person or family in the neighborhood? Someone recently made single by death or divorce? Perhaps someone who has recently become Jewish and especially needs to feel welcomed into the community?

How about a call to the synagogue office to find out who would like to be invited? If your synagogue leaders don't keep such a list, shame on them. How about getting active in starting one? That would really be a mitzvah!

Beyond our immediate neighborhoods or synagogues, there are other Jews who would like to hear from us. Soviet immigrant families are one

such group, and Rabbi Ellen Romir-owsky at the Federation of Jewish Agencies is actively seeking host families for them.

Local B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundations will know of students who would like to spend a Shabbat — either an evening or a whole day, depending on your practice — with you. Why not give them a call? In this city there are even poor and needy Jews, in the most literal sense. Inviting them to a meal or a simcha would truly be fulfilling the mitzvah in the fullest sense. Find a way to get involved!

As we move ahead from the holiday season, we are about to begin reading the stories of Abraham and Sarah. They are the ones who started this tradition for us, in case you didn't know. Their tent was pitched, so we are told, at a crossroads, where there were lots of wayfarers. The flaps of their tent, unlike most others, were kept wide open at all sides, showing that they were always "open for business" to receive

guests.

Of course, Abraham and Sarah also engaged in a bit of religious propaganda. Once the visitors had eaten and drunk their fill, they were invited to praise God, the One who had provided the good of which they had partaken. But it was only the generosity and genuine warmth that their hosts had offered that made these guests consider the blessing.

Some of these people, the rabbis tell us, became the first converts to Judaism. (Yes, conversion goes back that far in Jewish history!)

The prayer book of the Oriental Jews has a wonderful line in the blessing after meals, one that I have adopted for our own table. It reads: "May the merciful one bless this table like that of Abraham our Father [and we add: 'and Sarah our Mother,'] for the one who did much of the work!]; may all who are hungry come and eat from it, and all who are thirsty come and drink."

This is a real Jewish blessing. May it be said of your table as well! ■

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