

"HOSPITALITY IN THEORY AND IN PRACTICE"

At the beginning of this week's Sidra we find the tired, aged, post-operative patriarch Abraham looking for guests to invite into his home. The Rabbis declared that this was the greatest virtue of Abraham: hakhnasat orhim, hospitality. In this Abraham was preeminent, greater than all other Biblical personalities. Thus, Job too was hospitable: he built his home so that it contained four doors, one in each direction, to make it easier for any wayfarer to find his way directly into his house. Abraham, however, went a step further: he sat at the entrance to his tent looking actively for any strangers who might need his assistance.

Now, this is more than a charming and didactic narrative; it has become a normative part of Judaism, a halakhah. Thus, the Mishnah teaches that hakhnasat orhim is included in one list together with the precepts of honoring father and mother, doing kindness to others, visiting the sick, dowering a poor bride, and paying one's last respects to the dead. Hakhnasat orhim is more than a desert virtue, a life-and-death necessity for the Bedouin. It is relevant to every age, even more so to a society as mobile as ours, and therefore so plagued with loneliness and friendlessness. An analysis of the theory and practice of hospitality will teach us the deeper meaning of hakhnasat orhim, and also give us an insight into the over-all quality of the Jewish ethical personality.

The first thing that we must understand is that hakhnasat orhim is not just a reflection of a gracious character. It is fundamentally an act of religious commitment.

The Rabbis expressed that in their statement that gedolah hakhnasat orhim mi-kabbalat pnei ha-shekhinah, "Hospitality to the wayfarer is greater than receiving the divine Presence." They gather this from the Biblical story at the beginning of this morning's Sidra. We find Abraham in the midst of a divine revelation (vayera elav ha-Shem), but before it has proceeded very far Abraham interrupts the revelation in order to wait on three strangers who chanced into his field of vision -- as if Abraham had said, "O Lord, please wait a minute -- I must attend to the wayfarers who need me!"

Now, this is a charming homily. But is it not a bit extravagant?

I believe that this rabbinic dictum can be interpreted just a bit differently and will, in the process, yield us a profound insight. The Hebrew letter mem is a prefix which normally means "than," but which also can mean "from." I submit that in the context of our passage, the mem should be understood not in the former, comparative sense, but in the latter, derivative sense; in other words, not "hospitality is greater than receiving the divine Presence," but: "hospitality is greater when it derives from the openness to God." What the Rabbis meant to say, therefore, was that hakhnasat orhim is a noble virtue, but it is greater yet when it is practiced because it derives from a religious response. Why be hospitable?

Wherefrom the virtue of hospitality? -- from the openness to God!
It is the natural result of the religious personality.

I mean this not only in the sense that hospitality is a mitzvah, but in the more profound sense that every ethical trait recommended by Judaism is, in essence, an act of the imitation of God. Whenever Judaism demands a specific ethical performance, it bids us emulate the personality of God. Thus, we must visit the sick because the Lord visits the sick (even as He visited Abraham at the beginning of this morning's Sidra). As with all other ethical traits learned from God, so it is with the concept of hakhnasat orhim. We must be hospitable -- because God Himself is hospitable, because He is a makhnis orhim.

Perhaps my attribution of hospitality to God will become more meaningful in terms of a story told of the sainted "Hafetz Hayyim." It is told that an American Jew, who had heard much of the saintly Sage of Lithuania, came to visit him in his small town of Radin. The American Jew checked into the local inn, and forthwith went to the home of the "Hafetz Hayyim." When he entered, he was taken aback by its poverty and its starkness. He was not shy, and mentioned this to the "Hafetz Hayyim." "Rabbi," he said, "how can you live with so little? All you have is this one room containing nothing more than a bed, a chair, a table, and a candle!" At which the Rabbi turned to the American and said, "But where you are staying in Radin, what do you have in your room?" "Well," answered the American, "it is true that I have nothing more than a

bed, a table, a chair, and a candle. But I am only staying at an inn overnight!" "Ah," said the Rabbi, "but aren't we all nothing more than passersby, merely wayfarers in the world? The whole world is nothing more than a hotel: some of us check out earlier, some later, but none of us is a permanent resident. We stay here only at the leave of the divine Innkeeper. We are His guests, He is our host. And if we are only wayfarers, orhim, then what I have here is more than sufficient!"

Thus, we are guests, and it is God Who performs the mitzvah of hakhnasat orhim. From Him, we learn that we too must be hospitable. How gedolah, how great is hakhnasat orhim when it derives mi-kabbalat pnei ha-shekhinah, from a contemplation of God as the great cosmic Host!

Hence, hakhnasat orhim is far more than entertainment. Were it but that, we might be constrained to agree with the turn-of-the-century cynic, Ambrose Beirce, who defined hospitality as that "virtue which induces us to feed and lodge certain persons who are in need neither of food nor lodging." Hospitality is a personal, religious duty, not merely a social grace. Therefore, it applies especially to strangers, rich or poor; and most especially does it apply to out-of-towners. Thus, the Halakhah rules that a meal provided to out-of-towners is considered a seudat mitzvah (a "sacramental meal"), with all the halakhic consequences that flow from this designation.

In that case, since hospitality is by no means identical with entertainment, it means that we must be gracious, but only

within limits. By this I mean that we must not emphasize the aesthetic element to the point where if we are deficient in it, we should rather do away with hospitality altogether. When it comes to entertainment, a hostess wants to put her best foot forward or refrain from it altogether. That is understandable. However, hospitality is in a different category. We should be as gracious as possible under the circumstances, but it is not the most important thing. Thus the same "Hafetz Hayyim" taught us the meaning of the Mishnah in the Ethics of the Father, that "your home should always be wide open, ve'yiheyu anim bnei betkha, and let poor people be members of your household." What does it mean that poor people should be "members of your household?" The "Hafetz Hayyim" says that just as when we feed the members of our own family, we are not terribly meticulous about the graciousness of the meal or the neatness of the home or the decorations or the kind of cutlery we use, but we simply feed them breakfast and lunch and dinner as adequately as possible, never for one moment preferring that they go hungry if we cannot be at our most gracious, so must it be with the poor: our hospitality is not secondary to the social graces of our home and our meal.

Yet, having said this, we have not exhausted the significance of hakhnasat orhim. The fact that this act has profoundly religious import should not drain it of its human content. And hospitality must evoke the best from within us. Maimonides taught us that there are a number of components of this mitzvah of hospitality.

There is, for instance, akhilah u-shetiyah, providing food and drink for the guest, and providing him lodging. But there is another element too: levayah, accompanying the guest, walking with him a short distance when he leaves our home. This would seem to be nothing more than a minor point of etiquette. Yet the Rambam teaches us that this levayah is more important than akhilah u-shetiyah. This is a teaching which has its source in the Talmud, based on the concept that food and drink is a mitzvah she'be'mammano, one we perform with our money, whereas accompanying the guest is a mitzvah she'be'gufo, one we perform with our own bodies. But even more important, the accompaniment of the guest shows that our hospitality was not just perfunctory, not just because we feel socially indebted or because it has become a habit, not even, if you will, because it is just a mitzvah! Rather, when we perform levayah we show the guest that our hospitality was meant for him as an individual, that we are genuinely sorry to see him go, that we hope he will come back and visit us again. And this too is a mitzvah!

Our hospitality, therefore, must be at one and the same time the religious act of submitting to the divine will and imitating God, and a human act of concern and gentleness, of consideration and friendship. Never must hospitality be an act of self-aggrandizement, where I invite only "important" people whose presence will reflect on my prestige and enhance my reputation and my social status.

It is told of the two great Hasidic masters, the brothers R. Elimelech of Lizensk and R. Zusya, that when they were younger they "celebrated exile," a mystical act of purposely going into exile, traveling around the countryside as anonymous beggars in order to accept upon themselves the pain of loneliness and alienation. During this time, they came to one town and they asked the richest man of the town for hospitality. He refused them as did the others. Only the poorest man in town opened his home to them. Several years later the two rabbis were again travelling together. This time they were among the most famous rabbis of all Europe, and together numbered their followers in the many thousands. Once again, they chanced to visit this same town, and they entered into it with their horses and wagons and retinue, with their great reputations and fame preceding them. When they arrived, that same rich man (who did not recognize them) pleaded with them deferentially for the privilege of being their host. The Rabbis instructed their servants that their horses and wagons were to be quartered with the rich man, while they were going to stay with the poorest man in town. When the wealthy man asked for the reason for this humiliation he was told, "We are the same people we were last time. The only difference is that then we were without horses and wagons, and now we came with them. Apparently, it is not us whom you desire to honor but our horses and our wagons. Hence, we are sending them to you, while we are going to the one who extended himself to us as human beings."

It is this element of simple human concern and friendship that should be of major importance to us. It is, admittedly, harder for us than it was for the ancient Bedouin, and even more difficult for us than it is for our contemporaries in smaller cities, to practice the art of hakhnasat orhim properly. I refer not only to the fact that our conditions are crowded and we do not have the spacious homes that others have in smaller communities, and therefore we are less able to provide lodging for a stranger. I refer, rather, to the levayah attitude. As residents of what has been called the "technopolis," the great enormous city built around technology, our very sanity depends upon our privacy, and in order to retain our privacy we must of necessity severely cut down on the number of human contacts we are willing to develop. We big-city dwellers come into contact with so very many people in the course of the average week, that were we to develop a full, blossoming relationship with each, we would have no time for ourselves, our family, our development, our careers, our business. We must be selective and choose carefully those relationships we want to advance. So that there is good reason for what is apparently the coldness of the big-city dweller. And yet, it remains our sacred duty not to allow this condition to deteriorate to the point where we leave our elementary humanity, our basic decency towards the stranger.

Furthermore, as religious Jews there are certain dividends

to our practice of hakhnasat orhim in the proper spirit. Just two weeks ago I had lunch with the president of one of the local colleges. He is an alienated Jew, mostly assimilated and from the Mid-West. Very recently, he has shown some interest in Judaism, but of a very weak nature. These past holidays, someone convinced him to take his 11-year old son with him to visit the hakafot of certain Hasidic groups in Williamsburg on Simhat Torah. They went there and were mightily impressed. At one point, the Hasidic youngsters, dressed in their typical Hasidic garb, noticed the strange youngster, obviously not of their kind, standing by, and pulled him into the circle, and gradually the youngster became part of the singing and dancing group. He was so impressed, that upon his return he insisted that his father provide him with Hebrew lessons, which his father is now doing, and many religious practices have begun to find a welcome audience in that home. I asked the father: was it because of the exotic quality of the Hasidim? No, he answered, it was because of their hospitality, their genuine humanness, their simple openness to a stranger whom they took to their hearts.

I would respectfully urge that we of The Jewish Center keep that in mind. I know that it is hard to know who amongst our visitors is a stranger, who really needs and desires our attention, and who is merely a neighbor who is "shul-hopping." But there are people who are lonely or simply hungry for a word of human kindness,

even for a perfunctory gesture. Each person who enters this synagogue is a whole world, an entire universe of sentiments and sensitivity, of delicacies and obscure motives, of profound mysteries. It behooves us to make ever greater efforts towards levayah, towards the proper attitude of making him feel wanted and welcome. Someone's day will be "made" or someone's week brightened by a warm word, by a friendly "Gut Shabbos," by a simple courtesy. As our Rabbis were wont to say, yesh koneh olamo be'shaah ahat, it is possible for a man to acquire his entire "world" in one hour! One word, one smile, one greeting can win us an entire "world" -- the world that is each and every human being, stranger or companion.

So both are necessary: religious commitment and human consideration. This is true not only for hakhnasat orhim, but for every Jewish act or activity. We require both heart and soul. We desire both lev and nefesh.

Perhaps it is best to close with the statement of the Talmud (Men. 97) that in the days of the Holy Temple, the bet ha-mikdash, the mizbeiakh mekhaber al adam, the altar upon which sacrifices were offered would atone for a man. But now that there is no bet ha-mikdash, instead shulhano shel adam mekhaber, a man's table acts as the agency of atonement. What does this mean? The great Rabbi Gershon, the "Light of the Exile," tells us that this shulhan refers to the table about which a man offers hospitality to his orhim, his guests.

When we will have learned the Abrahamic precept of hakhnasat orhim, when our shulhan will be attended by orhim, when our home will have reflected both our religious commitment and our personal kindness and concern and comradeship, then we will have proven hospitable not only to our fellow men; then we will, in effect, have become the hosts of the divine Guest: the true Kabbalat pnei ha-shekhinah. And then our shulhan will have turned into a veritable mizbeiäh; our home will have been transformed into a bet ha-mikdash.

And then we will be the recipients not only of kapparah, atonement, but also of berakhah, blessing.