

Good Shabbos Everyone. In this week's parsha Vayeira, we read about the greatness of the mitzvah of Hachnasas Orchim. The Torah tells us that Avrohom Avinu "was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day." (Bereishis 18:1) Rashi explains that Avrohom Avinu was waiting to see if travelers would pass by, so that he could invite them into his home. When Avrohom Avinu saw that three men were approaching, Avrohom Avinu ran towards the men in order to offer them hospitality. When the guests arrived, Avrohom Avinu was in the middle of receiving the Shechina - the Divine Presence of Hashem. Hashem had come to visit Avrohom Avinu who was still recovering from his bris milah which had taken place three days earlier. The Torah quotes Avrohom Avinu as saying: "My L-rd, If I find favor in Your eyes, please pass not away from Your servant." (18:3) The Sages explain this verse to mean that Avrohom Avinu asked the Shechina to wait for him, so that he could take care of the guests. Avrohom Avinu and Sorah Emainu then quickly prepared a meal for the travelers. (Stone Chumash, p.79 citing Shabbos 127a and Shevuos 35b)

The fact that Avrohom Avinu put the needs of his guests over receiving the Divine Presence, shows the greatness of the mitzvah of Hachnasas Orchim. (ibid.) As the Sages tell us, "let your house be open wide" (Avos 1:5) Bartinurah explains that the house of a Jew should be like that of Avrohom Avinu, which had entrances on all four sides in order to make it easy for guests to enter.

Reb Eliezer, the father of the Baal Shem Tov, was so hospitable that he used to send people out to bring in travelers who were passing by his village. After the guests had eaten, Reb Eliezer would give them gifts, and provisions for their further travels. The Heavenly Court took due note of his exemplary conduct, and it was decided to put Reb Eliezer to the test. The accusing angel spoke up first: "I am willing to go down and test him." But Eliyahu the Prophet said: "No, perhaps it would be better if I were to go," His suggestion was accepted, and the prophet appeared at the door of Reb Eliezer on Shabbos afternoon in the guise of a poor drifter, with a staff in his hand and a knapsack on his back, in flagrant breach of the holiness of Shabbos. (Carrying in the streets is generally forbidden on Shabbos.) Reb Eliezer simply opened up his door wide and said "Gut Shabbos," and warmly welcomed the man inside. Reb Eliezer remained calm in the face of the chutzpah of his guest in desecrating the Sabbath before his very eyes. Reb Eliezer let no harsh word pass his lips that might put the poor man to shame. On the contrary, Reb Eliezer hastened to serve the man the Seudah Shlishis, and in the evening, when Shabbos had passed, prepared for the poor man Melaveh Malkah.

The next morning Reb Eliezer gave the man a liberal donation for his further upkeep, still without breathing a word about the shameful conduct of violating the holy Shabbos. At this moment, the prophet revealed himself to Reb Eliezer, and said: "Know that I am the Prophet Eliyahu, and I have come to test you. And because you withstood your test, and did not shame the one who came to your door, you have been found worthy of having a son who will light up the eyes of all Yisroel."

And in due course the blessing was fulfilled, and to this patient host and his dutiful wife was born the Baal Shem Tov. (A Treasury of Chassidic Tales, p.62, R.S.Y. Zevin, U.Kaploun, trans.) We see from this story the greatness of the mitzvah of welcoming guests into our homes.

In order for us to be able to perform the mitzvah of welcoming guests properly, we will now briefly detail the basic guidelines of this most important mitzvah. Most guests have traveled and are usually hungry and thirsty. This is hinted to in the verse which tells us that Avrohom Avinu ran to meet his guests. Ratz – (Ran) – is spelled Reysh - Tzadi, which are the first letters of the words ra-ev - hungry and tzameh - thirsty. Therefore, a good host will offer his guest something to eat and drink immediately after their arrival. As the verse states in Tehillim "...and You give them their food in its proper time;" (145:15)

Also, the verses tell us that "Avrohom hurried to the tent to Sorah and said 'Hurry! Three seahs of meal, fine flour! Knead and make cakes.' Then Avrohom ran to the cattle..." (18:6-7) Thus we see how important it is to serve guests quickly. Similarly, a host should avoid keeping a guest hostage by delaying the recitation of Bircas Hamazon – Grace after meals. This is hinted to in the verse, as Avrohom Avinu tells his guests: "I will fetch a morsel of bread that you may sustain yourselves, then go on..." (18:5) The Belzer Rav explains this verse to mean that Avrohom Avinu saw that his guests were in a hurry; so Avrohom Avinu did his best not to delay them. (As heard from Rav A.D.M. Bayer) The host should also avoid pressuring the guest to eat too much whether directly or indirectly by serving him extra large portions. In fact, although a guest must generally do as the host tells him, a guest however need not listen to a host who insists that he eat more. (O.C. 170:5, M.B. 17 citing Bigdey Yesha)

Also, although it is perfectly natural and proper to engage the guest in conversation, the host should chose his questions wisely, avoiding personal questions which could embarrass the guest. Just as the host has obligations to the guest, the guest also has obligations to the host. A guest should avoid being a burden on the host. The Talmud tells us that a guest should appreciate that his host has spent time, money, and effort on his behalf. (Love Your Neighbor Rav Z. Pliskin citing, Brochos 58a) The guest should not ask the host questions about his business, especially on Shabbos. A guest should also do his best to avoid raising topics of discussion which may be inappropriate for younger ears.

Finally, a guest should not make a nuisance of himself by staying too long or by coming too often. (Ibid. citing Pele Yoetz, Orchim)

By following the basic guidelines and by learning from the examples of Avrohom Avinu and Sorah Emainu, we should have the merit to warmly welcome guests into our homes for many years to come. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**