



When is Welcoming Guest a Woman's Mitzvah?

To Host or not to Host?

"Greater is the mitzvah of welcoming guests than receiving the Divine Presence" (*Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 127a*). Avraham was in the midst of receiving Divine revelation when he noticed three potential guests. In order to welcome his guests, he politely requested of G-d to wait for him until he had tended to their needs: "My Master, [addressing G-d] if only I have found favor in your eyes, please do not pass on from beside your servant [please wait for me until I return from my guests]..." (*Bereishit 18:3*). Hashem waited for Avraham, thereby imparting the eternal, overriding value of the mitzvah of hospitality. I recall our excitement to welcome guests, in the old days, when we were a young, newly observant couple. Almost no Shabbat went by without our table being filled with all kinds of interesting people, ranging from truth-searching strangers and seminar girls to young, newly religious families. Fast forward 30 years and I find myself so stressed out with all my responsibilities during the week, that I treasure a quiet Shabbat rest, home alone with my husband. As the years go by, I crave my own space and privacy more and more, in order to recharge and have energy to teach, write and counsel. Shabbat is supposed to be a time of rest, but this is not always so for the woman, when hosting many guests. Thus, the mitzvah of welcoming guests often leaves me with conflicting feelings. On the one hand, we have a beautiful home and garden and it's lovely to serve Hashem by sharing His gifts with numerous guests. Yet, on the other hand, it is hard. For example, last week, the first Shabbat getting back to daily routine after the holidays, I received the following email: "*Hello Rebbetzin. My name is Shmuel and I just joined the Yeshiva here in Bat Ayin. I'm very much interested in holistic medicine and I also loved the videos of your Midrasha. Can you please have me and two friends for the second meal on Shabbat day?*" 15 years ago, I would have been exhilarated by such an opportunity to host and teach, but this time, I was looking forward to a quiet Shabbat with my husband. Without Shabbat guests, we had time for a beautiful nature hike, which our busy lives otherwise do not afford. So, I offered to arrange Shabbat lunch for the Yeshiva boys somewhere else and invited them to eat with us in two weeks' time, when our son would be home from Yeshiva. It wasn't easy to let go of the opportunity to do the important mitzvah of welcoming guests, but in retrospect I believe I did the right thing.

Finding Our Personal Balance between Outreach and Recharging

We all need to find the right balance between chesed and gevurah – hosting and privacy. This balance can change from year to year, and even from week to week. Despite, the fact that Avraham, our father's hospitality par excellence is a model towards which we must aspire, we also must realize that we are not necessarily an Avraham or a Henny Machlis z"l. If we don't recognize the level we are on, but keep trying to reach beyond our capabilities, we may simply burn out. The mitzvot we perform halfheartedly, taking them on because we are supposed to, or worse, in order to please others or "keep up with the Joneses," never come off right. Who wants to be a guest of someone who would have preferred their personal space? Yet, on the other hand, we still need to constantly grow and 'up' our ability to say "Yes!" with our full heart. It's a constant *רצו ושוב/ratzo vashov* – 'running and returning' – to jump a bit out of our comfort zone, and then return to recharge. We all have a unique mission and a set of particular mitzvot to fulfill in this lifetime, but if we try to live up to all the amazing Biblical role-models in

every endeavor of life, we may be spreading ourselves too thin, and neglect fulfilling our own personal mission. I often come across the trend of lack of focus among women today who are 'all-over-the-place.'

Avraham and Sarah – The Ultimate Hospitality Team

Having said all this, I don't want to belittle the mitzvah of hospitality, celebrated in *Parashat Vayera* and in Jewish communities the world over. Of all times of the year, now is the occasion to aspire to become the 'Hostess with the Mostess.' Welcoming guests is certainly a mitzvah not limited to men. Although Avraham is most famous for his hospitality, what about Sarah? What part does she have in this mitzvah, if any? Avraham is known for his chesed – loving/kindness, so he is the natural hospitality whiz. Yet, Sarah is known for her gevurah – setting boundaries. So, we may imagine her telling Avraham: "Do we really need 500 guests for Friday night? Perhaps 400 would do?" However, nothing could be more in the wrong.

The angels asked, "Where is Sarah your wife" (*Bereishit* 18:9), to teach us the importance of the wife's participation in *hachnasat orchim* (welcoming guests). The presence of the woman makes the guests feel welcome, when her gestures indicate that she is pleased with their visit (Beer Mayim Chaim). The angels weren't only inquiring about Sarah's physical whereabouts, but also asking, "What are her good deeds that makes her worthy of a son?" The famous answer is, "behold in the tent" (*ibid.*) – the level of her modesty makes her worthy to conceive Yitzchak. Yet, "the tent" moreover represent the mitzvah of welcoming guests, which also imparts the merit of bearing children. When we actively show our love for others by hosting and welcoming guests, it follows that we are ready to behave lovingly to the guests of our womb ([Women at the Crossroads: A Woman's Perspective on the Weekly Torah Portion](#) p. 13).

ספר בראשית פרק יח פסוק ו וימהר אברהם האקלה אל שרה ויאמר מהרי שלש סאים קמח סלת לנשי ועשי עגות:

"Avraham hastened into the tent of Sarah and said: hurry make ready three measures of fine flour, knead it and make cakes" (*Bereishit* 18:6).

Just as Avraham is known for his kindness, so is Sarah, his faithful partner, steeped in deeds of chesed, as she busied herself with the endless task of preparing food for their numerous guests. Sarah supported Avraham's work in every way. As the ultimate hospitality team, they both merited to build the house of Israel.

What is a 'Halachich Guest'?

Performing *Hachnasat Orchim* properly merits children, as we learn from Avraham and Sarah, who, after feeding their guests, were told about the forthcoming birth of their son (*Bereishit* 18:10); (*Tanchuma Ki Tetzei* 2). This is also inferred from the Shunamite woman, who after hosting Elisha, was promised a son (*ibid.*). Our sages emphasize the great merit of hospitality, "When the Temple is standing the altar atones for a person; now that the Temple has been destroyed, a person's table atones for him, for his feeding of needy guests atones for his sins" (*BT, Chagiga* 27a with Rashi). Yet, not all hospitality qualifies for such merit. While it is nice hosting neighbors and friends for a Shabbat meal, these guests may not meet the criteria of 'halachic guest.' The Rema explains that a halachic guest is someone who truly needs a place to sleep and eat, such as a traveler away from home (*Shulchan Aruch, OC* 333:1). All the great virtues and rewards for welcoming guests described in the Talmud, moreover, apply specifically to the poor, who cannot afford to buy food or may even be homeless.

The Merit of Performing Hachnasat Orchim Today

How can we perform the mitzvah of hospitality today, when most people can afford to feed themselves? According to Rav Melamed, although today, there are hardly any people hungry for bread, and very few homeless, many people today still need help and encouragement. In our generation, there are no less depressed people. Although the standard of living has risen materially, to some extent, physical abundance has caused an increasing number of people to suffer from feelings of loneliness and alienation. Opening our homes to these lost souls can relieve their torment and provide them much needed emotional and spiritual support. Good, sympathetic, warm hospitality can bring back the belief that there is value to the lives of those who have lost their direction in life, despairing of themselves and their future. Feeling that people value them, are happy to spend time with them and want to help them gives them much needed encouragement. In addition, the many young people who come to Israel to study, may suffer from a feeling of homelessness. Especially those who have decided to make Aliyah, despite the opposition of their parents, need the family warmth that hospitality can afford them ([Peninei Halacha Between People 7:6](#)). So, although we may sometimes need a break from guests, in order to recharge, let us not forget that the mitzvah of welcoming guests engenders blessing in this world and the next, as it states, “Rabbi Yoḥanan said: There are six matters a person enjoys the profits of in this world, and nevertheless the principal exists for him for the World-to-Come, and they are: Hospitality toward guests, visiting the sick, consideration during prayer, rising early to the study hall, one who raises his sons to engage in Torah study, and one who judges another favorably, giving him the benefit of the doubt” (*BT, Shabbat 127a*). After learning all this, I’m certainly grateful for the opportunity to host guests this Shabbat.