

הכנסת אורחים

Strangers in Your Home: On Welcoming Guests

YOUR BIBLE AND TALMUD NAVIGATOR

Depending on how one feels, people either feel obligated or delighted to be/or have guests at your home. The social conventions of invitations, RSVP's, and thank you notes, at times, can feel oppressive. One may even ask, "What is the purpose of these rituals?" Yet, these conventions do endure and most of us, sooner or later, will be bound by them. Having guests, and being a guest is a fundamental element of all societies.

In this unit we will begin with relationships to those who are familiar and then slowly progress to the "other". So, maybe this unit should be called the strangeness of inviting guests.

Based on your experience:

1. What is the purpose of inviting guests?
2. Who do you invite as guests? Have you ever invited strangers home? Why or why not? If you have, how did you meet these strangers?
3. What do you do with guests?
4. Have you ever not been invited to an event to which you were expecting an invitation? How did you feel? How did you respond?
5. What is the connection between welcoming guests and building community?

YOUR GENESIS NAVIGATOR

In chapter 12 of Genesis, we first meet Abram as God gives him the command to leave his home and venture to the promised land, where his descendants will become a great nation, even though he does not yet have children. In chapter 18, Abram who has been renamed Abraham is visited by three messengers who inform him that his elderly wife Sarah will have a son.

In the following Biblical passage God visits Abraham when Abraham was recovering from his circumcision. Once you have an interpretation of this Biblical passage, try to see how the following Talmudic passages understand the same verses.

GENESIS CHAPTER 18

The Lord appeared to him [Abraham] by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot. Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and bowing to the ground, he said, "My lords, if it please you do not go on past your servant.

Let a little water be brought, bathe your feet and recline under the tree. And let me fetch you a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves; then, go on--seeing you have come your servant's way."...

YOUR TALMUD NAVIGATOR

The following passage is from the Talmud which is--among other things--a compilation of oral traditions which interpret the Torah. The Talmud is organized in an associative manner. Just as when you let your mind wander and you randomly connect one topic to another, the Talmud imitates this process.

The Talmud is comprised of two sections: The Mishnah and the Gemara. The Mishnah is a tersely worded collection of legal concepts which is interpreted and expanded upon in the Gemara. Usually a Mishnah is only several lines long while the Gemara's commentary on that Mishnah can go on for pages.

The following Mishnah is concerned with weighing the value of preserving the sabbath (Shabbat, in Hebrew) as the day of rest versus making room to receive guests and/or students. It deals with what is permissible and what is forbidden to do on *Shabbat*. There are also categories of activity that are technically **permissible**, but are so strenuous that they violate the **spirit** of the day.

To get an idea on how the Talmud works watch what happens in the following sources. The Mishnah incidentally mentions the issue of guests but the Gemara will use this as an opportunity to speak about the centrality of welcoming guests in Jewish tradition. What was incidentally mentioned in the Mishnah becomes a central theme in the Gemara.

MISHNAH SHABBAT 1:18 משנה שבת 1:18

מפנין אפילו ארבע וחמש קופות של תבן ושל תבואה מפני האורחים ומפני בטול בית המדרש... :

[One is allowed] to remove four or five large bundles of straw or wheat:

1. [in order to make room] for guests [on Shabbat] and
2. to [prevent people] from leaving [because of over crowding] the learning community on Shabbat.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, The Gemara Tractate SHABBAT 127/b גמרא שבת

מפני האורחין וכו'; אמר רבי יוחנן גדולה הכנסת אורחין כהשכמת בית המדרש דקתני מפני האורחין ומפני בטול בית המדרש ורב דימי מנהרדעא אמר יותר מהשכמת בית המדרש דקתני מפני האורחין והדר ומפני בטול בית המדרש אמר רב יהודה אמר רב גדולה הכנסת אורחין מהקבלת פני שכינה דכתיב ויאמר (ה') [אדני] אם נא מצאתי חן בעיניך אל נא תעבר וגו' אמר רבי אלעזר בא וראה שלא כמדת הקדוש ברוך הוא מדת בשר ודם אין קטן יכול לומר לגדול המתן עד שאבא אצלך ואילו בהקדוש ברוך הוא כתיב ויאמר (ה') [אדני] אם נא מצאתי וגו' אמר רב יהודה בר שילא אמר רבי אסי אמר רבי יוחנן ששה דברים אדם אוכל פירותיהן בעולם הוזה והקרן קיימת לו לעולם הבא ואלו הן הכנסת אורחין וביקור חולים ועיון תפלה והשכמת בית המדרש והמגדל בניו לתלמוד תורה והדן את חברו לכף זכות איני והא אנן תנן

אלו דברים שאדם עושה אותם ואוכל פירותיהן בעולם הזה והקרן קיימת לו לעולם הבא ואלו הן כיבוד אב ואם וגמילות חסדים והבאת שלום שבין אדם לחברו ותלמוד תורה כנגד כולם

[in order to make room] for guests [on shabbat]:

Rabbi Yochanan said, "Welcoming guests is as great as rising early to go to the Beit Midrash (communal study hall), as it is taught in the Mishnah: "[in order to make room] for guests [on Shabbat] and to [prevent people] from leaving the Beit Midrash." Rabbi Dimi from Nahardea said, "Welcoming guests is greater, because the Mishna teaches it first and then talks about making room for students."...

YOUR TALMUD NAVIGATOR

1. What does Rabbi Yochanan teach, and how does he use the Mishna to support his point? How does Rabbi Dimi's teaching differ? Explain how the Mishna supports his point.
2. What is the relationship between studying Torah in the Beit Midrash and inviting guests home? Why are they compared?

AND NOW, ON WITH OUR STORY...

...Rabbi Yehuda said in the name of Rav, "Welcoming guests is greater than receiving the face of the *Shechina* (the Divine presence) as it is written, [about Abraham, Genesis 18] "My lords, if it please you do not go on past your servant. Let a little water be brought..."

Rabbi Elazar said, "See how the ways of the Holy One are not like the ways of flesh and blood. Our custom would never allow a child to tell his elder, "Wait until I return to you," while we see that the Holy One did so [waited until Abraham went to serve food to the guests], as it is written, "My lords, if it please you do not go on past your servant. Let a little water be brought..."

YOUR TALMUD NAVIGATOR

According to Rabbi Yehuda in the name of Rav, what does the story about Abraham going out to greet the three men teach us?

What does Rav Elazar learn from this story about the nature of God?

The Maharal, Rabbi Yehuda Loew of Prague was a late medieval (1525-1609) mystic, philosopher and mathematician. How does he understand the Talmudic passage we just studied?

THE MAHARAL, PATHWAYS OF THE WORLD CHPTR. 4

Understand this the following way: One welcomes guests because one honors the human who was created in the image of God, and this is considered to be a great thing, like rising early to go to the Beit Midrash which one does to honor the Torah. However, when Rav Dimi says that welcoming guests is greater than rising early to the Beit Midrash, he understands it the following way: Rising early to study Torah is the way we honor Torah, but when you welcome a guest it is tantamount to honoring God. For when one brings a guest into their home and honors him because he was created in the image of God, then it is as if they are honoring the Divine presence Herself, which is greater than honoring the Torah. Know that these statements only refer to welcoming guests who are new faces to one's home. Remember, however, that Rav said that welcoming guests is even greater than receiving the face of the Divine presence. His statement is consistent, for none can encounter the face of God directly as it is written, "No human may see My face and live." (Exodus 32:20) So, indirect contact cannot be compared to what happens when one welcomes and honors a guest who appears as a new face and the host attaches himself completely to this image of God. So take these words in deeply, for there will be a time when you finally understand the difference between welcoming guests and receiving the Divine Presence, and now is not the time to explain any more of this to you.

YOUR TALMUD NAVIGATOR...AGAIN

Review Genesis 1:27. This is the source of the idea that humans are created in the image of God.

How does the Maharal support Rav Dimi's statement that receiving a guest is greater than receiving the shechina? Why do you think the Maharal emphasizes that this must be a new face?

Make a chart showing how each of the sources we studied in this unit imagines the relationship between the host, the guest, and God.