

HACHNASAT ORCHIM—INVITING THE STRANGER INTO THE CONGREGATIONAL FAMILY

By Magidah Khulda bat Sarah & Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

Take yourself back in time, way back to the eighth century before the Common Era. Your mission, should you accept it, is to become the prophet Isaiah. So put on your sandals—today you walk the streets of Jerusalem. . . .

There's the Temple. You enter and look around. Everything *seems* normal. You pause to watch the fire on the altar flame up. The place is crowded. It's always like that now, for New Moons, Sabbaths and Festivals. So *many* people—elders, prophets and priests. Everyone is there. Public life seems to carry on with due regard to the “godly,” at least as it's represented by the Temple.

Back on the street, you push your way through the crowds bringing their animals for sacrifice. Yes, everything is in its place. There, at the gates, the princes and judges are functioning as usual. The King is, no doubt, on his throne. All's well with Jerusalem. Nothing *looks* out of place.

And yet . . . look again! Open the eyes of your heart! Let God open your eyes to something that no one else sees. You yourself can hardly bear to look at it. A germ of death is gnawing at the heart of the people. A whole nation is sick at heart. There beyond them an abyss opens. Unbelievably, they rush toward it. *They* see nothing. For a cataract dims their eyes. And *nothing* is as it should be.

In the street, begging orphans swarm to you. An old man lies in a doorway. He doesn't beg. He's too far gone for that. But you can't forget the look, as if he expected nothing. Now you pass the landlord arguing in the street with a widow. She cries. He demands payment, now! Everywhere you turn, you see the money slide from palm to palm, even into the judge's hand. The greed seems to know no end. And all the while poor, deluded Israel keeps bringing animals to sacrifice as if they could appease God with fattened rams.

It's all so disappointing. You had such great hopes. Didn't Moses call you a kingdom of priests leading the way to God? Each was to offer himself to further the other; each to know the other as his complete equal. A society based on what is right and good.

But now? Now, a city that was to be all goodness and rightness has turned into crookedness. How did this come to be?

You remember. You watched them, generation after generation, wander away from the Torah, which they never *really* understood. And now?

Now they *fear* its influence. They fear what it will require of them. It's ironic. They have banished God into the Temple. Of course, tributes to God must be paid. The godly must be given its few crumbs of devotion. But meanwhile, life outside is lived on totally different principles and moving on quite different paths.

You try to tell them. Some of them laugh at you. Some of them hate you for it. But here is the worst, the depths to which they have sunk: The city that was to have been a beacon to the world, which was to have been the epitome of kindness, has now become . . . like Sodom. Sodom, where no one welcomed the stranger. Where the practice of hospitality was literally forbidden, by law.

You are sickened by it. You must turn your people around, or they will go into exile. You call out to them. And you call them by the name they deserve: “You Lords of Sodom.”

But what will you do? How will you bring them back to Torah and Israel? Where do you begin?

So how *will* you turn things around for your people? Where *will* you begin? What would you do here and now, in our day, to bring people back to your congregation and to the Torah?

Here is one place to begin. Here's one thing that we *can* do. We can do the exact opposite of what Sodom did. Our rabbis have said that one way to bring people to the Torah is *shulchan aruch*. The words *shulchan aruch* mean literally: the set table. That is, one way to bring people to the Torah is to bring them first to the table. We can follow the example of Avraham who we are told, *never* left the stranger standing outside—Avraham who the scripture tells us, in the middle of prayer, *ran* to greet three strangers and invite them to dinner.

The *mitzvah* is called *hachnasat orchim*, hospitality to or gathering of guests. It's the *mitzvah* that our rabbis say made Avraham into a prophet. It's one of those *mitzvot* you'll find in the front of your Siddur (from Shabbat 127a), for which we receive the fruits of them both in this world and in the world to come.

Every congregation can benefit from having a *hachnasat orchim chevra*, a group that is dedicated to gathering guests, formed to see to it that we *never ever* leave the stranger outside the tent, that *every* newcomer is welcomed and brought to the table, that is, invited to a Shabbat dinner, and brought inside the congregational family.

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