

The Visitor: A Paradigm of Welcoming
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A few weeks ago Jen and I rented the movie “The Visitor”. Has anyone here seen the movie? It’s a story of a tired, lonely, middle-aged college professor in Connecticut who is just going through the motions in work and in life until, when he is called upon to attend a conference in New York, he returns to his barely-used apartment in the city one night and is shocked to find strangers living there. It turns out the apartment has been illegally sublet to two illegal aliens doing their best trying to make a living in America. After it becomes clear that they are in the wrong, the couple apologizes profusely and leaves immediately. The professor, Walter, watches them from his window and realizes that they have nowhere else to go, so he goes to them and invites them to stay while they find other accommodations. Subsequently, the three of them end up sharing the apartment and forming an unlikely bond of friendship and loyalty, pushed to the extreme when the young man, Tarik, is arrested and sent to a detention center. While I won’t spoil the entire movie for you, since it is compelling and I would recommend your checking it out, I will say that Walter ends up going out of his way and above and beyond to do everything he can to help and support Tarik through his struggles. In the process, Walter undergoes a

personal transformation, as his life becomes infused with a sense of meaning and purpose that had otherwise long since disappeared.

As I saw it, one of the main messages of “The Visitor” was how even a chance encounter amongst unlikely associates can have the potential to become something so much more, a relationship which would not have even gotten off the ground were it not for Walter’s surprising and out-of-character offer of hospitality to these two strangers who had inadvertently ended up living in his apartment. The opportunity to provide hospitality truly has the potential to bring out the best in our character, a fact which our parasha addresses as well, particularly through the story of Abraham and his mysterious visitors in the opening few verses of today’s reading.

While in the process of recovering from his painful Brit Milah in his old age, Abraham sits at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day and happens to see three men approaching. Though he was likely still in significant discomfort, Abraham rushes out to greet the three men, whom we as readers know are actually angels, bows to the ground, and implores them—“gentlemen, please, stop by my tent for some rest and refreshments!” Abraham then makes a point of eagerly, hurriedly, and actively hosting his guests. He “hastens” into the tent and instructs Sarah to “quickly” bake cakes, then he personally “runs” to the herd where he selects a calf to be

hastily prepared for a meal. All of this is despite the fact that Abraham had no idea that the strangers he approached were in any way important, let alone angels dispatched by God.

In his book Torah Today, Rabbi Pinchas Peli, of blessed memory, shared a Hasidic story about a great rabbi, then poor and unknown, who often travelled to a certain city where the only person who would offer him lodging was a poor Jew who lived in the poor section of town. As years went by and the rabbi became famous as well as wealthy, he came again to visit the same city. This time the wealthy head of the community sent a message to the rabbi, inviting him to stay in his palatial home. The rabbi gratefully accepted the invitation, but with a catch. You see, he sent his horses to the house of the wealthy man, while he himself went directly to the poor home of his old host.

When the rich man came running to express his shock, the rabbi explained to him, “When I used to come to this town on foot, you didn’t think of inviting me to your home. Now, when I arrive in town in style, in a beautiful carriage pulled by four horses, you invite me. So, as I see it, you must really be respecting the horses instead of me, and that’s why it is the horses who should go to your home and be welcomed as honored guests. 😊

This Hasidic tale reminds us that all visitors merit attention and hospitality, regardless of their stature, perceived or otherwise. Abraham had no clue that the three wanderers were important. The famous medieval Torah commentator Rashi quotes midrash, rabbinic legend, in explaining that Abraham probably would have believed that his guests were nomadic Arabs. Nevertheless Abraham does not hesitate, does not regard his guests with suspicion, but goes out of his way to pay his respects and welcome them into his home.

Moreover, we should not forget that in order to do this he has to get up from his sickbed and hurry outside in the scorching heat of the day to greet them. And—oh yeah—according to the biblical text in these first few verses of our parasha, he even leaves a meeting with God, who commentators say had come to pay a sick call! From this remarkable set of circumstances, the Talmud brings us a powerful lesson, which our Etz Hayim commentary cites—“Being hospitable to a guest ranks higher than receiving the Shekhina (God’s presence)!” Our tradition teaches that even God is willing to wait while we shift the focus of our attention to a wanderer or guest who may be physically hungry or thirsty.

When we transfer these lessons to our time, and a synagogue community, we can see that they are still very much applicable.

“Wanderers” come in many forms—while they may be physically tired or hungry, as in the days of the earliest synagogues when synagogues sometimes doubled as inns for those passing through the community in need of a place, now it is more likely that they could be spiritually hungry or thirsty—looking for a welcoming community, and a place to call home and worship comfortably. Perhaps they’re not even new or first-time visitors to the congregation; even longtime members of the congregation may just feel like they are “wandering in” in the sense that they are seeking to get involved in attending services or activities for the first time or the first time in a while

How can we perform the mitzvah of hakhnasat orkhim, of welcoming these different kinds of “wanderers” and helping them find their place?

We are trying to set the tone from the outset by starting with greeters in the lobby, as we have had today and in many recent weeks—we are moving towards having greeters for services weekly so that the first taste people get of the shul when they walk in the door from the street is a positive and hospitable one.

Our ushers, too, are the next to extend a friendly greeting and offer assistance in distributing kippot, tallitot, and pamphlets that will be needed for the service. In the sanctuary, while the service is going on, each of us

can do things like quietly wish someone a Shabbat Shalom as they find their seat, and hand them a siddur or humash as well as show them the page to make it easier for them to transition right in to the flow of our service.

Finally, when the service is over, each of us can seek out new or unfamiliar faces and try introducing ourselves to at least one person that we haven't met before—find out who they are, and if this is their first time visiting or how long they've been here at BSO, and what brought them in the door today. And, we can invite them to sit with us if we are sitting down for lunch, or, if we happen to be having a Shabbat meal at our home, we can invite them to join us.

I come back to this theme of welcoming and hospitality frequently in remarks I make here at BSO because I believe its importance cannot be overstated when it comes to building stronger community and achieving some of the most vital goals of being a synagogue people truly desire to be a part of. I was extremely disappointed to hear from one of our longtime members that when this member recently visited another synagogue on a Jewish holiday, no one welcomed this member, introduced themselves, or found out what brought this individual to their community. **We cannot let that happen here.** It's difficult to walk into a synagogue with many regular attendees and most of the service being conducted in a foreign language that

is unfamiliar to, or difficult for, many people. One ought not be left feeling like a stranger. Moreover, meeting strangers and those we might at first glance consider to be “unlikely acquaintances” and treating them with kindness and hospitality, *hakhnasat orkhim*, the welcoming of guests, can yield many kinds of positive results, including the blossoming of unexpected friendships.

Hospitality has always brought out the best in people, when regarded as a joyous privilege and opportunity, rather than a burden or obligation.

Abraham was blessed for welcoming his guests into his tent.

The professor in the movie, “The Visitor”, was blessed by welcoming his guests into his apartment.

Can’t we try to find that kind of special blessing at home and here at shul and simultaneously try to fulfill one of the most important mitzvot in our tradition—one for which even God will stand and wait?