



Hakhnasat orhim-hospitality

When I was a kid, our family never had a lot of guests. We didn't have much space at home and, besides that, a home was thought to be a rather closed corporation. Eighteen years ago in Safed, a friend and I were desperately looking for a hotel room late one Friday afternoon. There were none to be found. A young schoolteacher, whom I remember today only as Judah, witnessed our consternation as we vainly sought accommodations. He approached us and said, "It is unthinkable that Jews should be without a place to stay on Shabbat. You will come home with me." That was when I began to learn about hakhnasat orhim—the mitzvah of bringing guests into the house.

Since that time my life was saved by a Jewish doctor who took me into his home in southern India; I was invited home for lunch by a lady in Rome because she heard me speaking Hebrew with someone; as a student, I schnorred my way across the country never paying for lodging because there was always the home of a friend of a friend of a friend to stay at; I have eaten with a Quebec farmer who offered me dinner because he knew how far I must have had to walk uphill with my bicycle in order to reach the part of the road where his farm was located. I could multiply the stories endlessly.

I will never be able to reciprocate these people's hospitality. All that I can do is give to guests what some other hosts have given to me and hope that they will do the same for others.

Our family now places guests into two categories. The less gratifying are usually the people who just got stuck and need a place to stay overnight or for a few days. They never come from the same place twice and each guest's story is unlike the preceding one. If you want to continue to enjoy such people over a period of time, don't flutter over them too much. Chat as long as you find that good things are happening between you, and then only if you are not pressed with other urgent responsibilities. Beyond that, show them where the linens are, let them stow their belongings, and point out what's around for breakfast. When the time comes, they'll be on their way. Perhaps we have been fortunate, but we have almost never been seriously imposed on by our guests. In general, our guests have given us far more than we have given them.

There must have been occasional moments of desperation in some ancient rabbinic households or else the rabbis would not have suggested that there are realistic limitations to what one can legitimately be expected to do for a guest: "It sometimes happens that when a person receives a guest, he feeds him fowl on the first day, more ordinary meat on the second day, fish on the third, cheese the day after that, vegetables the next day, until he finally feeds him no more than greens" (Pesikta 31).

We find that we generally "specialize" in a second variety of guests—guests for Shabbat and holidays. At these times we are not pressed by outside con-

"Great is hospitality; greater even than early attendance at the house of study or than receiving the Shekhinah" (Talmud, Sabbath, 127a).