What Is Our Obligation to the Stranger?

YOUR TEXT NAVIGATOR

1. Read the text from Genesis 18 in the pink box in the middle of the page. You may choose to read the text aloud with your chevruta (study partner) or silently to yourselves. This text tells the story of one of the most-often referenced models of welcoming in Jewish tradition. Spend 5 minutes discussing these questions with your chevruta:

   - How do Abraham and Sarah go about welcoming strangers? What risks did Abraham and Sarah take? Do you think they were worth it? What are the potential rewards?
   - Is this how you would welcome strangers into your home? If not, how would you do so?
   - How could we apply Abraham and Sarah’s model to welcoming today’s refugees into the United States?

2. Spend 3-5 minutes skimming the “commentary” texts surrounding the central text on your own.

3. Choose 1-2 texts that most interest you and answer the guiding question(s) below with your chevruta (3-5 minutes per question).

   - Leviticus 19:34 and Rabbi Sacks: How might our own history as strangers in strange lands help us take a leadership role in today’s refugee crisis? Why do you think the Torah commands us to love the stranger? Can you command love?
   - UN Convention on Refugees & Passover Haggadah: How do (or don’t) these 2 texts speak to one another?
   - Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael and Anemaya Hartocollis: Given the limitations of the U.S. refugee resettlement program, without actually taking refugees into our homes, what else might we do to “open our doors wide” to refugees?
   - Rabbi Soleveitchik: What kind of tzimtzum (contraction) will be necessary for the U.S. to take a bigger role in today’s refugee crisis—on the part of our government, on the part of individual citizens? What are the risks and rewards?
   - Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 127a: So, nu? Is welcoming guests as important as study and welcoming God’s presence into our lives? What would it actually look like in our communities to live out those values?
   - Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael and Hermann Cohen: Do you agree that “true Religion” begins with the law to shield the stranger from all wrong? Why? How does the text from Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael present a holistic perspective on our obligations to the stranger?
   - Warsan Shire and President Obama: What kind of circumstances would make home feel like “the mouth of a shark”? How does Warsan Shire’s poem help give additional meaning to President Obama’s words? How might you use Warsan Shire’s poetry to make a case for our “moral obligation as fellow human beings to help people who are in such vulnerable situations”?
That’s not American. That’s not who we are. We don’t have a religious test for which a person who’s fleeing may be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

Article 33, 1951 UN Convention on Refugees

The Almight is the great makhnis orchim (welcomer of guests). God’s hospitality made it possible for humanity to exist, for the world to come into being. “To be” means to share in the infinite being of the Almighty. The Almight, like Abraham, invites people to partake of God’s boundless existence. Creation is an act of hakhnasat orchim (welcoming guests). We are just strangers whom the Almighty has invited into [the Divine] tent, which is the universe. How beautiful is the doctrine of hakhnassat orchim (welcoming guests).

Rav Yochanan said: Hospitality is guests as ‘great’ as early attendance at the House of Study. . . . Rav Dimi of Nehardea said: It is ‘greater’ than early attendance at the House of Study. . . . Rav Judah said in Rav’s name: Hospitality to guests is greater than welcoming the presence of the Shechinah (God). . . . There are six things, the fruit of which humans eat in this world, while the principal remains for them in the world to come: welcoming guests, visiting the sick, meditation in prayer, early attendance for study, rearing one’s children to the study of Torah, and judging one’s neighbor in the scale of merit.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in Abraham’s Journey, eds. David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky, and Reuven Ziegler