

Rosh HaShanah Day 1 5783
Temple Emanu-El of Haverhill, MA
Cantor Vera Broekhuysen

WELCOME/INVITATION

Welcome—b'ruchim haba'im, b'ruchot haba'ot, b'ruchimot hab'imot. Welcome to each one of us. Today, we are invited and welcomed by God and by one another into the joy and possibilities of a new year, and its challenges too. Even today's Torah reading reminds us of the importance of welcome, and helps us commit to welcome as a practice all year round.

We trace our Jewish value of welcome back to the story of Avraham. We speak of Avraham and Sarah's tent as the model for our wedding canopies, open on all sides, "big tent Judaism." Welcoming guests, *hachnasat or'chim*, is included in the list of mitzvot for which we are granted both a reward in this world, and an even greater reward in the world-to-come (BT Kiddushin 39b). This list also includes honoring one's parents, acts of lovingkindness, and bringing peace between one person and another. Pretty good company, for one little rabbinic mitzvah.

Avraham and Sarah's effusive welcome in Vayeira make anticipatory *t'shuvah*, repentance, for the city of S'dom's inhospitality and xenophobia. Back at the beginning of that parashah, before today's reading picks up, Avraham does offer full, enthusiastic welcome when three men appear outside of his tent. Avraham runs to meet them, offers them water and a foot-bath, the shade of oak trees in which to rest, slaughters a young calf for their meal, has Sarah bake them breadcakes, and brings out "both sour milk and sweet" (B'reishit 18:1-8). Avraham and Sarah's offered welcome is what allows them, narratively, to receive the most welcome news in the world: that Sarah will become pregnant and have a child. If Avraham had been grudging or churlish, the three divine messengers (as they eventually reveal themselves to be) might have stayed silent.

It's true, however, that Avraham and Sarah have a mixed track record on being welcoming. The expulsion of Hagar and her son is an anti-welcome, a scene of great pain for Avraham and no less, I think, for us. How could our Jewish ancestors first force a vulnerable young woman whom they enslaved to give birth, and then expel her and her child from their camp? Sarah feels she needs to protect, or hoard, Yitzchak's birthright and his inheritance of God's promise through Avraham. She commands, "Her son shall not inherit with my son" (B'reishit 21:10). Although God tells Avraham to listen to Sarah's voice and to not be distressed by Hagar's expulsion, God steps in to guarantee Hagar

and Ishmael's security and to promise reparations. Hagar and Ishmael are saved, but they do not return to Sarah and Avraham's home until Sarah and Avraham are dead.

Our Torah sets this distressing scene in high contrast against the successful conclusion of Avraham's talks with King Avimelech. Avimelech's servants had seized Avraham's wells and claimed that Avraham never dug them. Avimelech publicly recognizes that the contested wells are in fact Avraham's, and the two leaders seal their relationship with a commitment to mutual respect and peacekeeping. Avimelech engages in an act of t'shuvah, which strengthens his and Avraham's ability to trust one another, so Avraham can feel safe settling more permanently in B'eir Sheva.

וַיֵּטַע אֵשֶׁל בְּבְאֵר שֶׁבַע וַיִּקְרָא-שָׁם בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה אֱלֹ
עֹלָם: לֵד וַיִּגַּר אֶבְרָהָם בְּאֶרֶץ פְּלִשְׁתִּים יָמִים רַבִּים

The chapter and our reading today conclude with Avraham planting an eishel—often translated as a tamarisk tree—at B'eir Sheva, and invoking there the name of Hashem, the Everlasting God. (B'reishit 21:33-34)

Avimelech's act of t'shuvah allows Avraham to plant. When we are really and truly welcomed, we put down roots.

The Talmud, in Sotah 10a, quotes two different rabbinic opinions about this "eishel" that Avraham plants. Both possibilities demonstrate Avraham's long-term commitment to welcome. Reish Lakish and Rabbi Yehuda say that the "eishel" is an orchard of fruit-bearing trees, from which Avraham will be able to feed guests when he and Sarah welcome them. Rabbi Nechemiah says that the "eishel" which Avraham plants is actually an inn, planted in the earth to house and protect even more guests. Fruitbearing trees take, at minimum, three years of patient cultivation before their fruit can be harvested. Precious personal space and resources go into guesthouse construction. We see Avraham here, flush with his home's new security, expanding its doors. He and Sarah will share that stability and that nourishment with more guests, more strangers, so that all who come to stay can feel welcome enough to put down their own roots.

The Vilna Ga'on, in Kol Eliyahu on Vayeira, offers an interpretation: that planting this tamarisk not only facilitated Avraham's practice of hospitality, but symbolized a new start for the world. The Vilna Gaon

says that Adam, Noach, and the citizens of the city of S'dom all failed in specific areas of Jewish ethics. Adam sinned through eating (the apple from the Tree of Knowledge), Noach sinned through drinking to excess during his post-Flood traumatic disarray, and the city of S'dom sinned through its people's violent response to guests, attempting to harm two angelic beings who retreat to Lot's house for safety. Ultimately, as punishment, God razes S'dom to the ground. The Vilna Ga'on contends that Avraham, transcending the deeds of his spiritual ancestors, served God in how he ate, how he drank, and how he welcomed.

I don't think that the Vilna Ga'on took Hagar into account.

We are the heirs of Avraham and Sarah. We inherit their instincts to welcome, to host, to feed, to refresh, to serve; when we feel security in our persons and our resources, to share it and invite others into it. We also inherit Avraham and Sarah's sin of fear, of holding too tightly and hoarding what we claim as our birthright and sending away people who we should have supported.

We are also the heirs of Hagar. Her story too is ours. From how many doors have Jews been turned away, told "you're no longer wanted here"? How many of us have cried out in the wilderness and been answered, miraculously, from compassion more expansive than we could ever have hoped for?

Each act of Jewish welcome that we create can be t'shuvah for the acts of anti-welcome of which our ancestors and we have been guilty. We can make Jewish welcome our answer to our own experiences of expulsion, on both sides of the door.

We are blessed to have, in our lives, beloved spaces and relationships into which we can welcome others. We can welcome into a sharing of spirit and activity. When our Temple's doors and Zoom room open up; when we call one another to say, "Hey, I'm going to Weir Hill with the Temple's Chai Time Hikers on October 29, do you want to come?"; when our Temple board and committee chairs and members create an open house to show folks around our spiritual home, we are welcoming one another into a holy, warm, engaged community with a passion for friendship and justice.

In our Jewish year and lifecycle practices, the language of invitation welcomes us into positive mitzvot: mitzvot of doing something. A person recites "hin'ni muchanah umzumenet l'kayyeim mitzvat aseih." Here I am, ready and invited—m'zumenet—to perform the mitzvah of S'firat ha'Omer (counting each of the forty-nine days between the second night of Pesach and Shavuot) and to perform the mitzvah of

helping a new child enter into the Jewish covenant. A zimun, or invitation, gets everyone at the table involved in offering the blessing after a meal. Rosh HaShanah offers us an invitation too: What positive mitzvot do you feel invited to engage with, in this new year? Into which beneficial actions of chesed, lovingkindness, and tz'dakkah, justice, might you invite others?

Welcome and invitation move mountains. It can be very hard to start a new activity, or to enjoy the company of a new friend, until you're personally invited to do so. I can make all the good, sincere resolutions in the world to go to the gym, but I don't actually get myself through those doors unless I have a buddy who calls and says, "I'll meet you there in half an hour." We don't do until we're invited, we don't do until we're welcomed. In that spirit, I want to invite you—yes, you!—to volunteer as part of our temple. An hour here or there of your time, doing something you enjoy with convivial people, makes a world of difference. Our bulletins and Shavuons offer a wide range of volunteer opportunities: an activity here or there, a committee, the board, and more. And if you'd like to get involved but aren't yet sure what fits you best, get in touch with our Temple president Jenn Lampron, who will be delighted to hear from you!

Welcome is part of our Jewish American DNA. Irene Chalek and other members of our Social Action Committee, chaired by Lisa Herzl, have been welcoming new Afghan refugees this past year, helping them get settled and onto their feet, in partnership with the International Institute of New England, Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill, and other interfaith allies. With the Merrimack Valley Interfaith Sanctuary Network, our members, Sharyn Russell prominent among them, have also continued to support two asylum seekers, one from Togo and one from Ecuador, and their new baby. From rides to diaper drives to sewing circles to apartment preparation to accompaniment to medical appointments to legislative advocacy, our community has seen firsthand the difference that welcome can make in a person's life.

I have to acknowledge that welcome, as Jews and as a Jewish community, may feel spiritually or even physically risky to do today. Antisemitism, other security concerns, the past two plus years of COVID—all of these have tried and tested Jewish communities who seek to balance welcome and safety. It's not just Jewish spaces where anxiety has risen: statewide, xenophobic fear is coming out loud and strong against the Work and Family Mobility Act that passed this summer, and there is a ballot question in Massachusetts this fall to keep that law in place. But states and communities both that make new arrivals

unwelcome, lose out on crucial opportunities for connection and growth. The truest measure, the truest act of love is not to hoard but to share. Safety concerns and security measures and the sheer exhaustion of these latest years must not shut down the invitations we offer. If we lose our ability to welcome, we diminish the communities we seek to safeguard. We diminish our ethical, human, Jewish calling. Welcome is what keeps us strong. Welcome is what keeps us safe.

I'll end with a story from Labor Day weekend earlier this month, when I traveled up to Vermont for four days and three nights of celebrating an extraordinary teacher, Larry Gordon z"l, who died tragically in a bicycle accident last November. Larry taught me and thousands of other people to sing world folk music together in an organization called Village Harmony. No auditions, no music-reading required, just a willing voice. Larry's life was an invitation to the dance of communal music-making as a spiritual discipline. As a cantor, my life's goal is to live up to his example. Will Thomas Rowan is a singer in Windborne, one of the dozens of professional ensembles that have come out of Village Harmony. Will spoke from his heart at the final concert of the weekend: "Larry taught us all that it's not our job to be gatekeepers of what we love, but to stand at the door holding it open, saying 'come in.'"

This year, answer the invitation of Rosh HaShanah to make welcome a core of your days. Find what you do that you love. Find what makes your heart leap. Acknowledge that we are, like Avraham and Sarah, capable of destructive fear, but capable also of openhearted invitation. Stand at that door to your community, to your passion project, to your insights, holding it open, and say, "come in." And watch your welcome change our world.

L'shanah tovah umtukah.