

Shabbat Hayyei Sarah 5783 - The Test of Strangers
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Shabbat Shalom.

The greatest test of our character is how we treat strangers.

I want to begin with a story shared by the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. He wrote a loving tribute about the late Maurice and Vivienne Wohl, who were wonderful people and transformative philanthropists. But what really captured him about them was the story of how they became a couple, as he was 30 years older than her. Rabbi Sacks writes:

When they met, Maurice was in his late forties, a dedicated businessman seemingly destined for a life of bachelorhood. Vivienne, not yet 20, was the daughter of friends of Maurice who had asked whether she could work for him during a vacation.

One day, Maurice offered to take her for lunch. On their way to the restaurant, they passed a beggar in the street. Maurice gave him a coin, and walked on. Vivienne stopped and asked Maurice if he would be kind enough to give her in advance a substantial sum – she named the figure – from this week’s wages. Maurice handed over the money. She then walked back and gave it all to the beggar. “Why did you do that?” asked Maurice. “Because what you gave him was not enough to make a change to his life. He needed something more.”

When the week came to an end, Maurice said to Vivienne, “I am not going to give you your full wages this week, because you gave away part of the money as a mitzvah and I do not want to rob you of it.” But it was then that he decided that he must marry her, because “Her heart was bigger than mine.”

This interaction with a stranger demonstrated her overflowing kindness toward others, and Maurice wanted that shining soul to be his life partner, his family. Vivienne was not aware that this moment was her test in the eyes of Maurice, but she passed it magnificently.

This contemporary story brings to mind the ancient story we read today in Parashat Hayyei Sarah about our matriarch Rebecca and Abraham's servant. Recall that after Sarah's passing, Abraham becomes consumed with finding a wife for his son Isaac to extend the family covenant with G-d into the next generation. Abraham sends his servant on a mission to be the matchmaker - likely named Eliezer, but we cannot be sure because he is never named here.

The servant arrives in Abraham's hometown and asks the first girl he meets to draw a little water for him. It's Rebecca, and she draws water for him... and then for all his many camels. Talk about going above and beyond for a stranger! She didn't exactly just turn on the tap and let the water run. She had to break a sweat to lower the bucket and raise the bucket again and again. Though he asked just for himself, Rebecca offered to do so for the camels, who are not exactly light water drinkers. All this for somebody she didn't even know.

And if you look carefully, you see she acts with speed: she *quickly* lowered her jar, *quickly* emptied her jar, *ran* back to the well to draw. Three times the Torah indicates the speed at which she performed this kindness, to show that she really meant it. Of course the servant was astonished by her generosity and knew she was the one. Particularly for Isaac, whose parents Abraham and Sarah also treat strangers like family, famously welcoming three passersby into their tent and lavishly providing for them. Significantly, the Torah notes Abraham's quickness in caring for others three times as well: he *ran*, he *hastened*, he *ran*. So Rebecca inherits Abraham's spiritual DNA of caring for others, which makes her a perfect fit for this family, the Jewish family.

You don't have to be Jewish to be kind and generous toward strangers; thankfully many in our world do exactly that. But to be Jewish means we too inherit this spiritual DNA where kindness to strangers is more than social action, even more than social justice. It's a Mitzvah, a sacred deed, an action that makes G-d's presence more felt in the world. And it's not optional for us, but expected.

We too are tested when we have the opportunity to share with strangers, particularly those in need. And while every day we should treat strangers well, there is a season for kindness and that time is now. From the days leading up to Thanksgiving that extend through the winter holidays, we have so many opportunities to use our hands to make a positive difference in the world. These days are darker outside, but our kindness brightens up the world for people who need our help.

Some days I give sermons and I ask you to think. Other times I speak and ask you to feel. On certain times like today, I ask you to act.

There are so many ways to extend kindness and care to people who need it. Tomorrow is Thanksgiving Mitzvah Day at the synagogue, where families purchase and package Thanksgiving dinners for local families in Waukegan. Please join us.

The Winter Coat Drive has begun, and we have buckets by the main office for people to drop off their used winter clothes to keep other neighbors warm. Please contribute.

As always, we are collecting deliveries for the Ark, so our neighbors in Chicago have what they need. Please help however you can.

I know many of you already do this and much more, during this holiday season and throughout the year. Thank you. You make a tremendous difference. This year, I ask that you take the next step and involve the younger generation when possible. Encourage your kids and grandkids to join you to do one of these or something similar. You will be passing the torch of living generously to the next generation, much as Abraham and Sarah did so to Rebecca.

Let's teach the next generation that even young people can make a big difference in the lives of our neighbors. Kids should learn that it doesn't even take many dollars to keep someone warm; we can do it with the clothes we already have.

This reminds me of a teaching from the Talmud that affirms that as important as charity is - Tzedakah - deeds of loving kindness are superior in three ways - Gemilut Hasadim. Our Rabbis taught: Tzedakah can be accomplished only with money, but Gemilut Hasadim can be accomplished through personal involvement as well as with money. Tzedakah can be given only to the poor, but Gemilut Hasadim can be done for both rich and poor. Tzedakah applies only to the living, but Gemilut Hasadim apply to both the living and the dead. (Sukkah 49b)

Vivienne Wohl shared generously with a beggar, which revealed the true size of her heart to the man who became her husband. Rebecca shared generously with Abraham's servant and camels, which showed that kindness was so intuitive that it was simply a reflex. For us today, as we enter Thanksgiving Week, there continue to be many opportunities for each of us to make the same kind of difference - a world of a difference - to strangers around us.

For the greatest test of our character is how we treat strangers.

Shabbat Shalom.