

Soul Food

reflections by Liat Kushner Richman

When a stranger lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The stranger living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.

Leviticus 19: 33-34

I am sure we have all seen them in synagogue. The newcomers. Those folks whom we eagerly await to join our community. Yet we do not always know how to reach out to. They are those who come seeking a community, but we, in our Shabbat zeal to talk to friends and family members, easily overlook them.

Our name – Kehilat Gesher – means a community of bridges; we are meant to bridge between the different types of members that we are comprised of - Anglophones and Francophones, Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews, Jews by birth and Jews by choice, and non-Jewish family members. I would like to suggest that another bridge we can extend is that all-important reaching hand to the visitor and the newcomer.

¹ The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. ² Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. ³ He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. ⁵ Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant."

"Very well," they answered, "do as you say."

Genesis: 18: 1-5

In the above quote, Abraham is a prime illustration of the importance that Judaism puts upon receiving guests – strangers and friends alike – and hosting them in our homes. It is said, moreover, that Abraham's tent was open on all four sides to welcome in passers-by as they wandered by in the desert. Of course, he lived in the desert and the importance of having a place where wayfarers could stop to rest was quite important. Which is not suggesting that we keep our door open to those wandering our streets. However, it may remind us that though we keep our doors locked, we can still keep our metaphorical doors – those of our hearts – open.

Being new arrivals in Paris three years ago, Bryan and I made the tour of the Conservative and various Liberal synagogues in Paris. In fact, we wrote to several of them ahead of time with some questions about the Jewish community. While some of the responses were a terse "come and stop by when you arrive," it was Rabbi Tom Cohen who answered at length and made us feel immediately that his synagogue was one we wanted to try on for size.

Not surprisingly, the reception that we received upon our arrival made the decision of which synagogue to join quite easy. At Kehilat Gesher we were

welcomed with a warm smile and friendly inquiries, while at other synagogues we remained anonymous visitors with whom the locals did not interact.

This happy transition is one that our community can impart to all newcomers. It is important for us to reach out to these people – reach out to any new person walking in through our doors – in the same manner that we would like to be welcomed in a new place. Just like Abraham welcomed the strangers before he even knew who they were and what their character was all about – he reached out and offered what he would have liked to receive had he been hungry and tired in a foreign land.

Hungry did I say? While our *tfillah* (prayer service) can fulfill one's spiritual hunger, there is nothing like a warm Shabbat or holiday dinner to tell a newcomer that they are part of the community and that they are being welcomed. While some may think that it is rather precipitous to invite a stranger for dinner, it is rather up there on the scale of *mitzvot* and something that is easy for us to offer. After all, how hard is it to add an extra plate to the Shabbat table?

A friend from our synagogue has been wanting to host for the past year, but there was always something that stopped her – the house was not neat enough, the table not big enough, the walls not painted yet. A few weeks ago, when she told me she was ready, I sent her way a guest from the US and another local guest. Guess what? No one noticed the mess in the house, the table was large enough, her kids were model hosts, and the walls seemed just fine. She confided that it was a wonderful experience, which she wishes she would have done earlier – the guests were charming, it was lovely to have everyone around the Shabbat table together for a change, and it added a dimension of spirituality to her Shabbat.

Indeed, this is an easy chance for all of us to add an extra dimension to our Shabbat. It is no secret that there are many singles and families who come here from abroad to work or study. Often times, these folks find themselves without the family and friend support network that they are used to. It is not easy for them to invoke a Shabbat meal out of thin air. By welcoming such a person into our homes, we help them to connect with their new city, and re-establish their contact with the Jewish community. It is a true *mitzvah*!

So, the next time when you see someone new at Kehilat Gesher, or even someone that comes every week but who you know lives alone – don't hesitate! Rush out like Abraham and Sarah and invite them for a Shabbat meal. Not only will you be gaining "mitzvah points", but you will truly feel enriched by the encounter and you will have made someone's Shabbat, as well as your own, that much more special.