

The Mitzvah of Hachnasas Orchim

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If one looks in the Sefer Hachinuch he will find that the entire Sefer Bereishis only contains three mitzvos: pru u'rvu, bris milah, and gid hanasheh. However, I often heard from Harav Hershel Schachter quoting Harav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik who explained that Sefer Bereishis is replete with halachos. One of the most fundamental of all of Hashem's commandments is (Devarim 28:9) V'halachtah b'drachav, and you should follow in the ways of Hashem. The Gemarah (Sotah 14a) explains that this teaches us to imitate the actions and character traits that Hashem displays in dealing with the world he created. Furthermore we are also told to imitate the ways of known tzaddikim, as their ways are the closest thing we have to those of Hashem himself. The best source for learning the ways of Hashem and his righteous followers, explained Rav Solovitchik, is Sefer Bereishis. It is here that we see Hashem interacting on a personal level with the Avos, who are the founders of Judaism, and our role models in the service of Hashem. We most certainly find this in the case of Avraham Avinu who is our guide to the proper performance of chessed. This manifests itself most clearly in his zealous adherence to the mitzvah of hachnasas orchim.

Source and importance of the mitzvah

As mentioned above, hachnasas orchim is part of the greater mitzvah of chessed (see Rashi, Shabbos 127b s.v. hachi). Chessed is not a mitzvah in and of itself, but is included in the broader commandment to imitate Hashem's ways. The Gemarah (Bava Metziah 86b) enumerates the exact reward that the bnei yisrael received on account of the hachnasas orchim shown by Avraham Avinu to the malachim who visited him. On account of any service which Avraham performed by himself, the Jews received their reward directly from Hashem, and anything done through a messenger caused the Jews to be rewarded in the same fashion. The Shlah Hakadosh explains (Parshas Vayeirah) that this is because we are all guests in Hashem's world and Hashem personally provides us with all of our needs. Thus bringing guests into our home is the highest form of imitating Hashem. Indeed, we find many promises throughout Jewish literature concerning the great rewards received by those who bring guests into their home (see Tanchuma, Noach perek 5, Chagiga 97a, Kaf Hachaim siman 5 s.k. 3).

Who is considered a guest?

The Rema (O.C. 333:1) writes that one is not officially a guest for the purposes of this Mitzvah unless he comes from out of the area and sleeps over by his host, or is invited for a meal while sleeping away from his own home. One who invites his neighbor over for a meal is not being machnis oreach, unless he has invited that neighbor on account of a guest who is sleeping at his home. Others contend (see sefer Hachaim perek 3) that any time one invites guests, and through his hospitality increases friendship and love between Jews, he is in fulfillment of this mitzvah. This not only applies to poor people, but to wealthy individuals as well (Maharil Likutim 60). The sefer

Yesh Nochlim (2:26) points out that one who brings a poor person into his home fulfills both tzedakah and hachnasas orchim. Rav Yaakov Emden (siddur Ya'avetz) adds that although one should attempt to bring proper individuals into his home, one is certainly mikayeim the mitzvah if he houses amei ha'aretz. We learn this from Avraham Avinu, who brought the malachim into his home despite thinking they were ovdei avodah zarah. In addition, one who houses a talmid chochom has fulfilled the mitzvah on an even higher level and receives tremendous reward (see Brachos 10b, 63b).

A peripheral issue in halacha that may be associated with inviting unlearned guests into one's home is that of saying berachos. The Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 169:2) writes that one may not give food to an individual who is going to eat it without saying a bracha because doing so constitutes "lifnei iveir". This can cause a problem in terms of inviting non-religious guests into one's home. However, the Magen Avraham (s.k. 6) writes that this is only when one is completely sure that they will not say a bracha. Furthermore, he this may only apply to things that require netilas yadayim and not in most cases of bracha rishona. In addition, the Chofetz Chaim (Ahavas Chesed perek 3 hal. 2) writes that this halacha does not apply to a Jew who is unlearned and does not actively reject the fundamentals of Judaism. If he is simply unlearned or lacks a proper Jewish education, he must be treated like any other Jew and is entitled to the same level of Chased that we afford all of our brethren. Moreover, Rav Shlomo Zalman Aurbach writes (Minchas Shlomo chelek 1 siman 35) that if one is afraid that his lack of hospitality in adherence to the Shulchan Aruch's ruling will cause the individual to turn even further away from Judaism, he may be lenient in this area.

Treatment of a guest

The following is a list of halachos related to the hospitality one shows for a guest based on the sefer Ahavas Chesed (chelek 3, perek 2).

One should accept his guest with a happy face and offer them something to eat, in order that the guest should not be embarrassed to ask. If he has any worries or troubles, he should not burden his guest with them. The host should be the one to cut the food for his guest in order that the guest should feel that he may eat to his own content. He should not show any signs of poverty, so that his guest will feel free to partake in the food. After they have eaten, he should offer the guest a place to sleep. He should, if possible, offer the guest a private room in order that he should feel comfortable and be able to rest at his leisure. The Sefer Chasidim adds (siman 312) that one should not ask his guest any divrei Torah unless he is sure that his guest is learned and is capable of responding in an educated manner. To summarize, one should take great pains to insure that his guest feels as comfortable as possible and has a cheerful and restful experience.

Escorting a guest

When a guest leaves the home of his host, there is a special mitzvah of levayah, escorting the guest on his way. The original reason for this is so that he is able to find his way though unfamiliar territory without feeling lost or alone (see Maharsha, Sotah 46b). The original shiur that one should escort his guest was 2000 amos, the amount of

the techum shabbos. For one who is unable to do this, the Rambam (hil. avel 14:1-3) records that the minimal amount necessary for levayah is 4 amos. This is the general practice nowadays that the roads are well traveled and somewhat easy to maneuver. Still one should try to escort his guest for at least 4 amos based on an additional reason that Rav Simcha Zissel Ziv, the Alter of Kelm, is quoted as having given. He explains that when a guest leaves the home of his host, he might feel that the host has had enough of him and wishes him to leave. This can cause the entire mitzvah of hachnasas orchim that had until now been performed scrupulously to leave the guest with negative feelings. Therefore, it is imperative upon the host to escort his guest, even for a very short distance, in order to demonstrate that he wishes that they could continue to spend time together. In this way, the guest will leave with positive feelings toward the entire experience.