

Be Our Guest

Surprisingly, the mitzvah of hachnassas orchim is not codified by the Rambam, the Tur, or Shulchan Aruch

Ra

By Rabbi Moshe Walter

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While the mitzvos of *bikur cholim*, *simchas chassan v'kallah*, and *nichum aveilim* receive a lot of attention, and Klal Yisrael does an incredible job fulfilling them, *hachnassas orchim* doesn't receive the same level of attention — not in halachic literature, in the public forum, or in the mainstream of our communities.

Surprisingly, the mitzvah of *hachmassas orchim* is not codified by the Rambam, the Tur, or *Shulchan Aruch*. Nor is it spoken about regularly, and almost no *shiurim* are delivered about this critical mitzvah. Why not? There are only a limited number of active communal *hachmassas orchim* organizations in our cities, compared to other crucial *mosdos*. Why are there not more?

I have wrestled with these questions for years. I have investigated, researched, discussed, and debated, and have ideas, but I still don't have the winning answer. Yes, we have Bikur Cholim societies and happily attend their fundraisers. Yes, we are quick to attend *chasunahs* and passionately raise money for a chassan and kallah. Yes, we rush to shivah homes and contribute generously toward shivah meals.

But *hachmassas orchim* is left out of the limelight. Therefore, the goal of this column is to sensitize us to the incredible need for *hachmassas orchim* that exists in our community, and to ensure that nobody is left alone at home.

Let me share with you a few things I know from my vantagepoint. People have complained to me that in all the years that they've been affiliated with their shul, they've never been invited out to a meal. People have disclosed that they feel lonely all Shabbos and just wish they could receive an invitation. They've shared that it's not about the food — they just want to be invited over on a long Friday night or long Shabbos afternoon simply to schmooze and hang out. It seems obvious to them that "certain people" are "always" invited out, and "I never am." I've heard it so many times: "It would make such a difference if someone thought about me and invited me over for Shabbos."

While the mitzvah of *hachmassas orchim* includes opening your home to friends, family, neighbors, and those passing through, there are many who live on our block, around the corner, and belong to our shuls who would welcome a Shabbos invitation. There are too many men and women in our communities slipping through the cracks. I am referring to the widower, the divorcee, and the many singles. The mitzvah of *hachmassas orchim* begins by opening our eyes, looking around, and opening our shul contact list.

The Chofetz Chaim points out that the Torah dedicates an unusually large number of *pesukim* at the beginning of *parshas Vayetira* to carefully detailing Avraham Avinu's hospitality to sensitize us to the heightened care needed for this mitzvah.

These *pesukim*, explain the Chofetz Chaim, are the *Shulchan Aruch* of *hachmassas orchim*. We learn from here that one should proactively seek out those in need of food or lodging; that we should focus on looking out for those who may feel left out of our community; that we should invite guests in advance and not as an afterthought; that we should get our children and family involved in the mitzvah; and that we should make our guests feel welcome, comfortable, and at home (*Abavas Chesed*, *Inyan Hachmassas Orchim*, chapter 2).

When the famed mashgiach of Yeshivas Knesses Yisrael in Chevron and Yerushalayim, Rav Leib Chasman, was still living in Europe, serving as rav of the city of Shtutzin, he had the opportunity to eat a Friday night meal at the home of the Chofetz Chaim in Radin. Rav Chasman noticed that the Chofetz Chaim did not sing Shalom Aleichem, welcoming the angels of Shabbos, prior to making Kiddush, but only at a later point during the meal. Rav Chasman asked the Chofetz Chaim why he sang Shalom Aleichem later in the meal when the entire world sings it before Kiddush.

The Chofetz Chaim responded that his guests were very likely hungry, making it painful for them to wait to eat. The *malachim*, however, don't get hungry. Therefore, he favored his hungry guests by starting the Shabbos seudah immediately. The *malachim* could be greeted with Shalom Aleichem later in the meal, after his guests were settled (*Tenuos Hamussar*, volume 4, chapter 7, page 118).

The Chofetz Chaim had a great sensitivity in fulfilling the mitzvah of *hachmassas orchim*, and this is reflected in this story and also in the halachic opinions of the *Mishnah Berurah*. (See *Mishnah Berurah* 271:1, where he rules leniently that a host may make Kiddush on Friday night even when he is not eager to eat the seudah yet — not halachically ideal — if there are hungry guests. See also *Mishnah Berurah* 639:36 with *Shaar Hatzion* 67, where he rules that if it is raining on the first night of Succos, a host should not wait until *chatzos* to eat if there are hungry guests.)

The Chofetz's Chaim table was filled with the needy, the hungry, the deprived, the destitute, the disadvantaged, and the abandoned. He cared deeply for them, nurtured them, and provided for their every need.

On top of all this, though, the mitzvah of *hachmassas orchim* offers the host an amazing benefit as well. We all struggle with the question of how to make our Shabbos tables engaging for our children and inspiring for people at every age level. I have a simple answer: Invite guests! The discussions, conversations, *divrei Torah*, stories, conversations, jokes, and good times will transform the Shabbos table for everyone. If you have never tried this, now is the time.

My own Shabbos guests have included converts, convicts, wanderers, military men, musicians, rappers, poets, wannabe artists, politicians, poor, rich, fun, boring, quiet, scary, challenged, depressed, and hilarious people. We have had people start running around our table; people we don't know have fallen asleep on our couch; and people who have regaled us with life stories that can't be repeated on these pages. We've had guests who've broken down in tears, and guests who have brought others to tears. We have also had guests who don't know when to leave.

Some meals are *me'ein Olam Haba*, while others are more challenging. Yes, we have had our fair share of very (very!) difficult guests, and extremely tiring meals, but most of our sedos are meaningful, uplifting, and just plain old fun.

However, undoubtedly the most meaningful are those meals that include the widow, the divorcee, the singles, the lonely, the infirm, the weak, and the isolated. When focusing on the latter, we hope that we have modeled for our children that we should always have our eyes and ears open for those in need. That is our highest obligation in life. That is what we are here for. That is what we are living for.

Hachmassas orchim isn't about the menu, the table settings, the wine you serve, or the number of people you invite; it's about being you and opening your world to others. It's about creating a place at your table for someone whose table isn't as full and complete as yours.

This winter, look around and see who you can invite into your home. Challenge yourself to reach out to those whom you've never reached out to. Look on your block, around the corner, in your section in shul, and ask your rav who would benefit from a nice Shabbos meal.

By opening your home, you are opening your heart. By fulfilling the mitzvah of *hachmassas orchim*, you are following the path of Avraham Avinu and walking in the footsteps of the Chofetz Chaim. Indeed, the reward for *hachmassas orchim* is the great joy of enjoying the fruits of your labor in This World, while the principal remains intact for you in the World to Come (*Maseches Pe'ah* 1:1).

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