

A place at **THE TABLE**

Opening up our homes and our hearts to guests | BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



IT WAS A LATE FRIDAY MORNING, SOMETIME between 10h00 and 11h00. Shavuos was to start Sunday night. I was at work when my wife called. We were living in a relatively small, out-of-town (meaning outside of the NY/NJ area) community in the US in which only a handful of people were on the list for having sleepover Shabbos guests. My wife had just been asked by the person who ran the sleepover guest list if we would be willing to have someone who was coming to town at the last minute. The person had asked to be hosted for Shabbos, motzei Shabbos, the two days of Yom Tov, as well as a few days after that. Everyone else on the list had said no. If we weren't able to have him, then he would

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wind up staying at a hotel and, since there wasn't a hotel in walking distance to the community, it would mean that he would be all alone for both Shabbos and Yom Tov. No pressure, right?

What was weird, what rubbed me the wrong way and which I just couldn't wrap my head around, was that an observant Jew didn't just pop into town on a whim hours before a Shabbos that was itself just a day before a two-day Yom Tov. And he was coming from the next state over,

which wasn't terribly far away, so what was the big hurry? Why hadn't he made plans in advance? We had one young child and my wife was pregnant with our second. Was I being reckless by having such a person? I mean, who was this guy? We were told that he had a reference with whom we could speak, so I figured I'd at least call and check him out, hoping to allay my concerns.

As it turned out, although the reference had had this man for meals on Shabbos,

SHABBOS



the man had never actually slept at anyone's home in the community. The community had special hospitality flats where guests who were visiting could be put up – and that's where this man had been staying for the weeks or even months that he had been in that community. I did learn more details about our potential guest: He had been an Israeli bus driver. He spoke only Hebrew. His child had suffered a terrible illness; the medical treatments had bankrupted the family; and the stress of the whole thing had taken a tremendous toll on the parents' marriage, bringing it to an unfortunate end. The man had come to America to try and collect tzedakah to cover the huge medical bills with which the family had been left.

So I was back to square one. Who was this guy who was behaving oddly by pitching up erev Shabbos at the last minute – by choice, not because his flight was delayed or because he'd gotten stuck without a place, etc., but who was deliberately choosing to put himself in this precarious position which might mean having to stay at a hotel and be alone over Shabbos and Yom Tov – and would it be okay to expose my young family to him?

I called a trusted friend, who did his best to tell me how crazy the whole thing was

and how I must think of my own family first. He was adamant. And then there was my wife, who was adamant in the other direction, asking how could we leave this poor man to be in a hotel over Shabbos, let alone Yom Tov? I didn't know what to do. After some tense deliberation, we finally decided to have the people who ran the hospitality list relay the following message to the man: we would be happy to host him for Shabbos (since I would be around the whole time) and we would have to get back to him about Yom Tov as well as the other days for which he had been asking. I can't say that I wasn't still nervous, having never had a complete stranger sleep over in our house before, but I figured this was the best way forward.

He arrived very close to Shabbos and I went out to greet him and help him with his bags. When he stepped out of the car and I expressed my surprise to him about his

pitching up at the last minute erev Shabbos, essentially erev Yom Tov without a place to stay, he raised his hands to his face, kissed his fingertips, and then held his open hands towards heaven, saying something like b'ezrat Hashem (with help from Hashem). At that moment, everything fell instantly into place and it was like a light went on. The small detail – which for me explained everything – that everyone had failed to mention was that the man was Sephardi. And as I would quickly come to realise, he had an emunah peshuta (a simple faith), clearly feeling closely connected to Hashem and constantly watched over by Him, not worried or fazed in the slightest about showing up in a foreign city at the last minute, confidently knowing that Hashem would provide for him one way or another. And, despite everything that this man had been through, he was still b'simcha – living his life with joy.

I can still vividly picture him sitting at our set Shabbos table before we left for Shul and singing Shir HaShirim (Song of Songs), as many Sephardim are accustomed to do on Friday afternoons before mincha. I sat there frozen, staring at this man who had suffered so much pain in his life and yet continued to serve his Creator with such joy. And I can't think of a better way to illustrate this point further than by what happened when we arrived home and sat around the Shabbos table with all of our guests that night. This man, who we'll call Avraham, had a beautiful voice and he added so much to our table with the zemiros that he sang, uplifting everyone who heard his voice.

We had sort of an unusual living situation. We lived in what I called a "Dr Seuss house", a house in a house. Our landlord had taken his old house and built another,

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new house in front of and on top of his original house, so picture a house with an inverted “L” shaped structure added to it. We lived in the old house and our landlord lived in the new house. We had to enter through what had originally been the rear entrance of the house, as the front door of our house, ie. the original house, now opened into the ground level of the new house and, obviously, we didn't use this entrance ever.

So, as we sat at our table that night and Avraham sang zemiros, there was suddenly a knock at the old front door of our home – and that meant it could only be one person: our landlord. I looked at my wife and grimaced. We had obviously been making too much noise and Avraham's singing had been the final straw. The landlord was coming to ask us to keep it down so that we didn't disturb his family at this late hour. I opened the door and found not only my landlord, but his Shabbos guest standing next to him. Before he could say anything, I quickly apologised for having disturbed them. But my landlord waved both of his hands and shook his head and said, “No, no. That's not why we knocked. The singing...it's just so beautiful. Can we please join you?” I was dumbfounded. I motioned for both of them to come in and quickly pulled up chairs to the table so they could join us. Avraham wound up staying with us for the rest of the week, just as he had originally asked. And the experience wound up changing my life – and our home – forever.

Because of Avraham, our family has grown up regularly having guests at our table and in our home. For my children, it's just not Shabbos or Yom Tov if our table doesn't have guests. In fact, I fondly remember when I once had to speak at a Yom Tov dinner motzei Shabbos. We decided, in order that we could finish the meal early, nap, and so that I could pre-

pare a bit, to not have any guests for lunch, that is except for a young man who had become like a member of our family, a ben bayis. When the children found out, they protested regarding the lack of guests, and our defence that we actually would be having a guest, since this young man would be joining us, fell on deaf ears. Instead, they argued that, since he came so often and basically had his own room in our home, he had become like part of the family, so he no longer counted as a guest! (There are times, like that one, where my children make me laugh and recall the famous episode in the gemara where Eliyahu describes Hashem's reaction to a situation as laughing and saying, “My children have defeated me! My children have defeated me!”)

Another time, when we had just moved, our youngest, who was about 3 and a half years old, found out that we weren't having Shabbos guests for our first Shabbos in our new home, as we had barely even begun to unpack. She literally fell to the floor and threw a gigantic tantrum, beating her little fists against the floor, tears streaming down her face, and crying out, “What do you mean we're not having Shabbos guests?!”

I've suggested it in these pages before, but some messages deserve repeating: the Shabbos Project is a perfect opportunity to go out of our way and invite people who we haven't had at our table before...and to keep inviting them back again and again, letting them know that they always have a place at our table. Because every Jew deserves a Shabbos table that he can call home, even if it's not in his own home – a place where he knows he's always welcome, where there's always an extra helping, where a chair and a place setting can be gladly added, just as it would for any family member who happened to show up. ■

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