

## Temple Emanu-El Erev RHS 5780 Sermon

### Rabbi Max Miller

Shana Tovah! I am in awe of our congregation. Just the other day I was standing in our lobby with Rabbi Colbert; together we took a moment to marvel at the changes and evolution Temple Emanu-El has undergone in the past year, the past few years, the past decade and longer.

On the cusp of this new year, I am grateful for what Temple Emanu-El has given me and what we continually give to one another. First among those things we have given one another is a welcoming embrace into this spiritual space. This is not something we should take for granted. This is something that makes us truly unique. Having been in dozens if not hundreds of synagogues in my life thus far, I am always thinking about how we welcome our family *and* how we welcome guests.

Whenever I think of welcoming guests, I think about Israel, about Jerusalem. When I spend an extended stay in Jerusalem, I like to visit different synagogues each Shabbat evening and Shabbat morning. While I feel most comfortable in a Reform setting, every congregation that I have visited in Jerusalem has a special spark to it. In fact, no matter the denomination, Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform, all synagogues in Israel share one very special thing in common—well, besides speaking Hebrew.

As each synagogue's service would wind to a close, and as is the case in all synagogues around the world, the president or a member of the board would stand at the front and make the weekly announcements. The speaker would say once in English and once in Hebrew, “if anyone is visiting us this Shabbat and does not have a place to go for Shabbat dinner or lunch, please meet so-and-so at the back of the sanctuary. We have members of our community who would love to host you for a meal.” Wow, what a community! What a people. Families who would blindly open up their home to visitors, strangers. Each week I would see a few individuals or couples new to Jerusalem or new to Israel stand up and meet at the back of the sanctuary to go off for Shabbat dinner or to make plans for lunch. Seeing this week after week warmed my heart.

This act of hospitality reminds me of a saying from a text called *Avot d'Rebbe Natan*, the teachings of Rabbi Natan, that goes:

עשרה נסים נעשו לאבותינו במקדש בירושלים,

Our rabbis say that God did ten miracles for our ancestors in Jerusalem during the days when the ancient Temple stood.

לא אמר אדם לחברו לא מצאתי מטה שאישן עלייה בירושלים.

No one ever said to another, I couldn't find a bed to sleep on while in Jerusalem.

מעולם לא אדם לחברו צר לי המקום שאליין בירושלים.

And never ever did someone say to another, this place, Jerusalem, is too small for me to spend the night.

During the time that the Temple stood in Jerusalem, our rabbis recall that everyone had a place to spend the night. No one was left without a bed to sleep in or a warm meal for the Sabbath. How amazing to see this continue two thousand years later.

One Saturday morning in Jerusalem, Rachael and I decided to go to a traditional but egalitarian synagogue in a hip neighborhood. Near the close of services, we heard the familiar announcement, “if anyone would like to have Shabbat lunch with a member of our community, please come meet so-and-so at the front of the sanctuary at the conclusion of services.” A woman, one whom we had seen a few times before, but with whom we had not really spoken, approached us and asked if we would like to join her and her husband for lunch. With a little hesitancy we looked at each other and thought, sure why not? This is our chance to experience the famous and random hospitality of Jerusalemites on Shabbat.

Together we walked to their home in the neighborhood adjacent to the synagogue; a modest ground-floor one-bedroom apartment. Truthfully, the meal was not that memorable; rather, the memory that will always stay with me is the open hospitality of this family. This woman scooped up two random Jews for Shabbat lunch as a matter of ritual, because this act of hospitality was not random at all. No, her hospitality is connected to her Judaism—it is a deeply ingrained part of their culture and religion—our culture and religion. I had that tingly feeling during our meal that we were engaged in something truly holy that Shabbat. This Jewish home and millions of Jewish homes around the world are meant to be open like this—with audacious hospitality.

The origins of Jews lionizing hospitality has its roots in the Torah. In the Book of Genesis, in parasha named Vayeira, meaning, “he saw,” we find our patriarch, Abraham, resting in the shade immediately following the creation of the covenant between God, Abraham, and all of Abraham’s descendants. The opening verse says that God appeared to Abraham in the heat of the day as he was sitting at the entrance to his tent. Though God was by his side, when Abraham looked up, he saw three men standing near the entrance of his tent. Immediately, Abraham stood and *ran* to greet the men, bowing low to the ground.

The Hebrew is quite emphatic here.

וַיֹּשֶׁא עִינָיו וַיַּרְא

He lifted up his eyes and saw

וְהִנֵּה שְׁלַשָּׁה אֲנָשִׁים נְצָבִים עַלְיוֹן

Look, three men standing right on top of him!

וַיַּרְא וַיַּרְץ לְקַרְאָתֶם מִפְתָּח הַאֲגָל וַיִּשְׁתַּחַוו אָרֶץ הָ

In the blink of an eye, when Abraham saw the men he hurried and ran to greet these guests at the entrance of his tent, throwing himself on the ground below him.

Abraham practically begs these strangers to honor him with their presence in his tent. There is no indication yet that Abraham already knows that these men are God’s messengers. All the text says is that Abraham saw three strangers, and instinctually welcomed them into his home. Abraham brings the men food and water and even offers them a foot bath! Abraham and Sarah, his wife, then get to work preparing a meal for their new guests.

This story, like the experience I shared from Jerusalem, is the epitome, the very height and best, of Jewish welcoming. This scene might *even* be called the very first Jewish action. You see, only a sentence prior to this whole scene, Abraham was circumcised and made to be the first follower of God. Abraham’s first move, literally the first action he takes post brit milah, post

circumcision, is not to make a sacrifice, offer a prayer, or any of the other six hundred and thirteen commandments; rather, Abraham welcomes guests. How much more proof do we need to place *hachnasat orchim*, the Jewish value of welcoming guests at the very top of our list of Jewish values.

I've been thinking about this a lot lately. So a few months ago, I posted a question on Facebook, "what does welcoming mean to you?" Responses varied from the very logistical and practical, to the ideological and philosophical. Some noted that name tags, proper signage, and accessibility are key to welcoming. Others remarked that welcoming is not just saying hello and how are you; rather, welcoming means creating an environment in which a person feels like they belong—like they have ownership and familiarity with the space. In Talmudic language we say, "*eihu v'eihu divrei elohim chayim*," both of these kinds of responses are correct, they both represent the words and opinions of our sages, our Jewish values, and God.

These are some very basic, practical ways to be welcoming. AND welcoming cannot be an empty gesture that we check off a list after we give a handshake or offer a nametag. The truly welcoming community talks the talk and walks the walk. I began thinking about all of this when, months ago, our congregation set out on the ambitious and much-needed work to refresh our lobby. A lobby is nothing less than the opening to Abraham's tent, the stage upon which we welcome our guests, our friends, and our family. Our lobby is the introduction, the preface, and the prologue to the story of Temple Emanu-El.

In refreshing our lobby the goal wasn't to simply have a nicer space, though that is a plus. The goal of having a refreshed lobby is to fulfill Temple Emanu-El's mission, namely, to enable our Jewish community to live sacred time within the walls of our Beit Knesset, this synagogue. The lobby doesn't do the work of welcoming—that is on us. Rather, a stunning lobby, a beautiful sanctuary, and all the edifices of our congregation are the stage upon which we build our family. Ultimately, *we*—all of us—are the tools of welcoming. *We* create a community that welcomes each other and new members into our congregation. *We* enable each other to live sacred time. Now that *we* have built our stage, now that we have our set design in place, the work of welcoming can truly take off.

When it comes to welcoming the next generation, I have been reflecting on a major experience I had a few weeks ago. I had the privilege to go back to Israel with a group of couples from Atlanta through the organization called, "Honeymoon Israel." Honeymoon Israel provides immersive trips to Israel for local couples that have at least one Jewish partner, early in their committed relationship. The organization creates *kehilot*, communities, of couples who are building families with deep and meaningful connections to Jewish life and the Jewish people. These are people who identify with Judaism in one form or another, but they have not yet found their Jewish kehila. Like the work that Rabbi Rachael and I do to create a community with the twenty and thirty-somethings through Temple Emanu-El's NextDor initiative, Honeymoon Israel reaches those families who want a Jewish community, but who haven't found the right avenue into Jewish life. To put it simply, before this experience, the Jewish community had not sufficiently welcomed them or engaged them.

If you are or if you know of someone who fits this demographic, please introduce yourself to me after services. I would love to tell you more. And there are couples here tonight who went with me on this journey.

Today, Jewish life in America is full of opportunities to engage kids and their parents all the way through college, but there is or there was a chasm of Jewish communal engagement between college and life with children. Some cry gevault, they cry out and moan in agony over the slow demise of Jewish life in America. These pessimists blame the usual suspects: uncaring Millennials or intermarriage for destroying Jewish life as we know it. Others have more astutely said that Jewish life in America is simply undergoing its next inevitable evolution. That those in the Millennial generation or Gen X before them are simply engaging in Jewish life differently. These seventeen Honeymoon Israel couples all came from the Atlanta area. Some of the couples were even from the same neighborhood and never knew one another. All it takes to replicate this micro-community are dedicated people who are audaciously hospitable. It's not only about money. This trip isn't free. This isn't Birthright. The secret to success with Honeymoon Israel is the same secret that we all know, we are just looking for a place we belong, a place we call home. Sometimes, we need the invitation to walk through the threshold to that new home. I believe that is exactly what Temple Emanu-El is capable of.

The first boom in the American synagogue was after World War II. These congregations were catch-all gathering places for returning veterans and their families. Now, however, the next generations of young Jewish families, those Gen Xers and Millennials—and for that matter, the boomers as well—are looking for a change. Temple Emanu-El is not and cannot be a place that simply opens its doors to the community and expects everyone to line up and come on in—let's call that the Field of Dreams model, build it and they will come. Rather, Temple Emanu-El and all Jewish life must become active *ambassadors* for our congregation.

Our congregation does not exist only at 1580 Spalding Drive. In reality, we exist in every home in our directory. We create a mobile Temple Emanu-El when we go for Shabbat hikes, when we meet at cafes, when chavurot gather for ax throwing! We have so much to offer, but we can only expect to welcome and engage more people if we leave the halls of our synagogue and extend the Temple Emanu-El Jewish community into the homes, cafes, pubs, clubhouses, and parks of our greater Atlanta landscape. Anywhere our members are found: in Israel, doing to the work of social justice, trips to Montgomery, and the list goes on. We must be like Abraham and Sarah, a congregation that is like the city of Jerusalem: a synagogue which actively seeks to bring others inside. This is audacious hospitality—active, open, and eager to include others.

This is the model that we need to be successful. The lobby, the sanctuary, and our beautiful campus are like Abraham and Sarah's tent. We need them and we need them to reflect the beauty and vibrancy of our community. BUT, we also need be like *Abraham and Sarah*, actively seeking out guests to welcome and share this space with.

In our biblical story, Abraham did not wait inside his tent for the guests to approach. Instead, Abraham ran out to greet them, to bring them in, to show them hospitality, and to care for them. We must do nothing less than what Abraham did for the angels. With enthusiasm, we must

proudly engage others in Temple Emanu-El. When we treat each guest who enters our synagogue like the messenger of God, like an angel worthy of our attention and hospitality, then we bring greater blessings and members to our community.

Some simple steps that we can all take to welcome guests and each other into our sacred space starts with learning one another's names. This is why we encourage everyone to wear their name tag on Shabbat. We want all congregants to be on a first-name basis. Next, we should be inviting friends and guests to join us at Temple Emanu-El: for Shabbat, for classes, for holidays, and for all the amazing ways we engage and gather. Even greater than this, is inviting one another over for Shabbat dinner or lunch or even to grab a drink after services. Soon after Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur the holiday of Sukkot is coming. I say that because this is the *perfect* time to think about having guests in your home or using the sukkah at Temple Emanu-El for a meal with friends. The only thing I can dream of that would be greater than this is to travel to Israel together. The bonds of friendship formed in Israel are something like magic, and you know, Rabbi Spike is leading a trip this coming summer. The responsibility is on us—all of us—to be like Abraham and Sarah, to be like the city of Jerusalem: eager to welcome with warmth and love. Now that the entrance to our tent is beautiful and ready for guests, we must be ready to bring them in.

Abraham and Sarah's reward for their hospitality was the blessing of a child, Isaac. Our blessing and our reward is the same. When we reach out and welcome others into our congregation, we bless our community with generations to journey with us, finding deep meaning in the teachings of our people, and to engage in the sacred work of transforming the world around us into the world as it should be.

Source of Love, may we feel the energy to welcome in the stranger, the new friend, the individual or couple seeking deeper meaning into our community. Knowing that we grow stronger by the new bonds we build, may we set aside any fears that come with opening our arms and hearts to new people.

God of Abraham and Sarah's hospitality, bless us with a year of growth and renewal in the energizing bonds of new friendship. May our synagogue, our newly refreshed lobby, and the ground it stands upon be the platform upon which we will welcome in the next generation of Temple Emanu-El. L'dor vador, from generation to generation. Amen.

*L'shana tova u'metukah*  
May you have a sweet new year  
Amen