WELCOMING THE STRANGER = WELCOMING FAMILY

Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan or the Chofetz Chaim is most known for his intense desire to care for others and to honor the dignity and respect of others.

A story is told that a guest arrived to his synagogue just as Shabbat began. This guest had traveled for many hours, exhausted and starving from his journey, he walked home with the Chofetz Chaim where he was staying for Shabbat. As they sat down to the Shabbat dinner table, the Chofetz Chaim skipped Shalom Aleichem, a song which greets the Shabbat angels and is customarily sung before Kiddush over the wine and hamotzi over the Challah. Instead he recited Kiddush quickly, recited hamotzi and they began to eat. The guest was shocked and asked, “Rabbi, why did you skip singing Shalom Aleichem?”

The Chofetz Chaim replied: “Because you were hungry. A hungry person should be fed as soon as possible. The angels can wait to be greeted.”

The Chofetz Chaim set priorities for himself and for his guest. He cared for the needs and dignity of his guest knowing that during the meal, together they could sing and create a joyous atmosphere when both were feeling refreshed and the guest’s needs were met.

So many people in our world suffer from starvation, natural disasters, disease and war. Here in our local community, 7 Jewish Ukranian Families have arrived in to the arms of our community care and we have accepted the responsibility to care for them as the Chofetz Chaim cared for his guest.

How do we diminish their suffering, how do we help those in need and bring self-confidence to those who lack confidence in this world?

we read the story of Hagar and Ishmael. They were cast aside because of Sarah's jealousy. Sarah forces Abraham to cast them out so Ishmael will not share in the spiritual inheritance guaranteed to Abraham from God. As we read this morning, Abraham gives them some water and bread and Hagar with her infant son begins her journey in the Wilderness." toward her home in Egypt. She loses her way, the supplies are exhausted and they are on the verge of death when God calls out to Hagar to open her eyes to a well of water. They dwell in the wilderness and Ishmael grows into adult hood.

Our Sages, always curious to share with us what happens when a story within the Torah ends, created a Midrash of what happens to Ishmael. They say that Abraham took the water barrel and tied it Hagar's waste so she would pull it after her wherever she traveled. He would follow the marks and be able to find Ishmael. Now settled in the Wilderness of Paran, Ishmael married Aysa, a woman from Moav.

Three years later, Abraham visited Ishmael in Paran. He arrived at midday and found Ishmael's wife and asked her, "Where is Ishmael?" Aysa answered, "he has gone with his mother to fetch some fruit and dates from the desert." Abraham said to her, "Give me a little water and bread because I am famished from my journey." She answered, "we have not water and no bread." At this Abraham said, "When Ishmael, your husband, returns home tell him that an old man from Canaan visited and left a message that the threshold of the house is no good." Ishmael returned home and his wife reported the visit and the message. When he heard the message, he divorced her on the spot. Then his mother went and took him a wife from her father's home in Egypt, and her name was Fatima.

Three years later, Abraham visits Ishmael once again in the Wilderness of Paran. Arriving there at mid-day, he found only Ishmael's wife at home. "Where is Ishmael?" Abraham asked. Fatima replied, "He and his mother have gone to feed the

camels." He then requested of her, "Please give me a little bread and water because I am famished from the desert journey." She brought some and gave it to her. Afterwards, Abraham prayed for the welfare of his son and Ishmael's entire home was filled with all good things. When Ishmael returned home she reported what had happened, he knew from the blessings that he had received that his father's love had been stretched out to him for all time.

Our tradition teaches that even when Abraham was healing from his brit milah, his ritual circumcision at the age of 99, he went out his way to fulfill the mitzvah of Hachnasat Orchim, the commandment welcoming of people into his home. He provided food and drink to strangers; he is the example of generous hospitality an important mitzvah and deed today. We should do our best to emulate him because it is a core element of deepening relationships and developing good feelings for one another.

Abraham and the Chofetz Chaim demonstrated this mitzvah by welcoming individuals into their home and feeding them a sumptuous meal. Certainly, we know that to nourish the body is to nourish the soul. Our tradition teaches that there are many ways for us to fulfill individual mitzvoth, all we need do is find the ways that best fit our own skills, desires and abilities.

Welcoming others is a way to break down barriers and obstacles. And it is in those moments that we can begin to create stronger relationship and the joy that comes with sharing a meal or a time together. I am proud of our congregation not only for our work caring for others but that we can find ways as hosts to break down barriers and help us learn from one another.

In a Hasidic parable about a king and his son. After a particularly nasty argument, the king exiled the son. Years passed, the son wandered alone throughout the world. In time, the king's heart softened, so he sent messengers to find his son.

When they located the young man, he said he could not return to the kingdom. He had been too hurt, and his heart continued to harbor bitterness. The messengers brought back this message to the king. The king told them to bring his son the following message:

“Return as far as you can, and I will come the rest of the way.”

Life is too short for us to not provide help and hospitality to those in deed. Life is too short not to show dignity and respect to others by meeting them part way, even if we are diametrically opposed to their ideas. Life is too short for us to close ourselves off from the world in a way that ensures that we and others will continue to suffer the indignities of starvation, disease, war and loneliness.

When we sit down with someone who needs a visit, when we sit down at lunch with another so they don’t have to eat alone, or when we visit or call someone who just needs to know they

are not alone in this world.  We lift their spirits.  In effect, we spread the warmth our generosity of spirit and hospitality, we fulfill the mitzvah of Hachnasat Orchim and in that moment we fulfill the words of the Aleinu prayer.  L'taken Olam, healing to world and giving it strength for the future.

May we practice hachnasat orchim and diminish the suffering in our world because of our own acts of loving kindness.