

Creating a Home and a Haven: **A New OJC Challenge**

Parshat Vayeshev 5769
 By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

Of all the things that I do as a Rabbi, there is only one that I really don't enjoy – and that's attending congregational board meeting.

Then again I haven't met anyone who has said to me: "Oh, Rabbi, I can't wait to attend our next board meeting! They're so much fun!" Let's face it: board meetings are a necessary evil. It's something you have to do because someone or some group have to assume responsibility for the governance of the congregation and they have to make sure that everything is functioning the way it should. Invariably, however, I come home from meeting just a little aggravated and frustrated. My blood pressure is higher and I find myself wondering how we manage to stay afloat. Of course, everyone comes with the best of intentions but you know what they say about 'good intentions.' There's a road paved with good intentions leading from most houses of worship; I won't bother telling you where it goes....

This week, however, something happened at our monthly board meeting that left me feeling proud to be the rabbi of our congregation. Our board made a decision that I believe was visionary, compassionate, and exciting and I'd like to tell you about it this morning.

Monday night the board of the Oceanside Jewish Center voted to endorse our participation in a program called the Interfaith Hospitality Network. It is a program designed to provide housing for homeless families. At least once a year, our synagogue will open its doors for a week in order provide a safe haven for children and parents who have no place else to go. Several more times during the year we will assist neighboring churches in housing and feeding homeless families.

The Interfaith Hospitality Network is a national organization which has received recognition from the White House. Today there are a hundred and thirty six networks in 39 states with more than an 110,000 volunteers working to help homeless families. Each network is made up of 12-13 houses of worship that take turns providing shelter for local families. In most cases the church or synagogue provides housing three or four times a year. In our community, the Interfaith Council will be working as a single unit in a larger network so that within our community each house of worship will take a turn housing families while the other houses of worship will provide volunteers and assistance.

Frankly, I was a little nervous about pitching this program to our board. There were a whole variety of reasons that I could think of for why our congregation might not want to do this or why it "wouldn't work." Our building is not exactly conducive for this type of program and then there is the question of how this program might impact our caterer's business. This is no small matter: we have a responsibility to maintain the building in a certain fashion so that families celebrating simchahs are comfortable and at home. Then there was the question of Kashrut, and Shabbat, and religious school...I could think of at least a dozen reasons why we would respectfully say, "We're sorry; we can't do this," or at the very least, we might say, "We support this program where but we can't be hosts."

When I discussed this program with members of our congregation, however, even before the board meeting, the response was almost unanimous: “Rabbi, how can we not do this? How can we turn people away who have no place to go?” Besides, if our neighboring congregations have risen to this challenge then we need to think seriously about this program. As I thought about it, I realized that all my questions were nuts and bolts details that can be worked out. The bigger question was: Were we willing to put our money where our mouth is? We have talked the talk about the importance of social justice and civic responsibility. But are we willing to do about it? What are we willing to do about homelessness here in our community?

So what exactly are we being asked to do? When a church or a synagogue serves as a host congregation, it provides space for five families (approximately 14 people) to stay for a week at a time. The families are only present in the house of worship at night and are out of the house of worship by 6:30 the next morning. Communities provide guests with a hot dinner, a light breakfast and a bag lunch to take with them. Volunteers are present to make the guests feel at home and at least two people must stay over night with the guests. Everything else is provided by the network: bedding, transportation, and back up assistance.

During the day families are bussed to a day center where they can shower, take care of their other needs and where there are social workers who help them find housing. I’m told that most guests find housing within six to eight weeks in this program.

Who are the guests? They’re families, plain and simple who have fallen on hard times. They are the fastest growing group of homeless in America today. Many of them are single parent families but others are intact families that simply haven’t made it. Every one of them has a story to tell. Some of them are working during the day and simply have been unable to afford housing. There are children who go to school by day but sleep in a shelter at night. Most are mortified and embarrassed to admit that they’re facing such dire circumstances.

And they are not alone. There are families right here in Nassau County that sleeping in their cars because they have no place else to go. While there is housing for single people who are homeless, families are often faced with dividing up in order to find a place to stay. And I don’t think I have to tell any of you that we are facing a major crisis in America today with a growing number of people who have lost their homes.

So our board has made a commitment but we have a lot to accomplish if we are going to make this program work. Most of all we need volunteers not only to welcome these people into our community but to provide them with compassion, caring and a sympathetic ear.

You know, tomorrow night we will mark the beginning of Chanukah. The word Chanukah means rededication. Our ancestors celebrated the rededication of the temple 2200 years ago after a ferocious battle with the Hellenists. After living in the mountains for almost two years they returned home to their communities They rededicated their homes and their temple and they welcomed God’s presence back into their midst.

We are fortunate. We have a roof over our heads and most likely we have a contingency plan God forbid we are faced a crisis. Most of us have friends and family we can turn to and money in the bank in case we have a crisis. We can’t even imagine what it would be like to be alone and homeless. But that is not true for many of our neighbors. About 3.5 million US residents, including 1.35 million

children, have been homeless for a significant period of time. Homeless families are the fastest growing group in this extended community today. Over 37,000 homeless individuals (including 16,000 children) stay in shelters in New York every night. This information was gathered by the Urban Institute, but actual numbers might be higher. As someone said to me, “How can we turn our backs on this reality? How can we say ‘no’?”

I hope to tell you more about this program in coming weeks – and I hope I can turn to you to get involved in this worthwhile project. I think this is the greatest gift we can give others and that we can give ourselves as we celebrate this festival of lights and dedication.

In the *Birkat HaMazon*, the Grace after Meals, we chant: "I was young, now I'm old and I have never seen a righteous person forsaken and his children begging for food." Unfortunately those words ring hollow in today's world. As a result, some people choose not to recite those words when they come to them at the end of the *Birkat HaMazon*. Personally, I do say them because I believe that if we are truly *ba'alei Tzedakah* – people committed to righteous living and giving – then our response when we do encounter such a person is not to accuse God but to reach out to them and to take care of them ourselves.

Several weeks ago on Yom Kippur we read the words of Isaiah: I would like to remind you what it was we read at that time....

“Is such the fast I desire?
A day for men to starve their bodies?
Is it bowing the head like a bulrush?
And lying in sackcloth and ashes?

No, this is the fast I desire:
To unlock the fetters of wickedness,
And untie the cords of the yoke
To let the oppressed go free; to break every yoke.
It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the poor into your home;
When you see the naked, clothe him,
And do not ignore your own kin.
Then shall your light burst through like the dawn
And your healing spring up quickly.”

As we begin this exciting project let these words be our challenge. Shabbat Shalom