Open Tents, Open Hearts

By Pam Morris, Early Learning Center director

Education as a career path and life goal began for me in 1992 with my graduation with a BS in Psychology from Binghamton University. That fall, I entered my master's program in Early Childhood Education at the same university, different school and I never looked back! With many relevant degrees, over 3 decades of hands-on experience, Early Childhood Education is my passion, my raison d'etre, my tachlit, my reason for being.

Picture it: a hot desert afternoon, thousands of years ago. Abraham is sitting at the entrance of his tent, recovering from a procedure most of us would want a week on the couch for. Then he looks up and sees three strangers walking by.

Does he pretend he didn't see them? Does he quietly close the tent flap and hope they keep moving? Nope. Abraham runs to greet them. He bows, brings water so they can wash their dusty feet, and offers them "a little bread." Then he hurries back and, with Sarah's help, serves up fresh cakes, tender meat, butter, and milk (Keeping Kosher wasn't yet "a thing"). "A little bread" turned into a full spread. (Every Jewish grandmother reading this is nodding. We know that move.)

This scene from this past Shabbat's parsha, Vayeira, is where we learn the beautiful Jewish value of *hachnasat orchim*, welcoming guests. Our sages teach that Abraham's tent was open on all four sides, so that anyone coming from any direction would find a way in. No front door to knock on, no wondering if you're welcome. Just open space, a warm smile, and probably a snack.

Welcoming Guests, the Real-Life Version

These days, most of our "tents" have doorbells, Ring cameras, and a dog who announces every visitor to the entire neighborhood. We send texts that say "here!" instead of knocking. We wave at neighbors from the car. Life is busy, and it's easy for welcoming to become something we do online with a heart emoji.

But something special happens when we open our doors in real life. When a friend comes over for coffee. When a new family walks into the J for the first time and someone says, "Hi, we're so glad you're here." When the neighbors come by for Shabbat dinner, even if dinner is takeout pizza on paper plates. (Abraham didn't say it had to be fancy. He just said, "Come in.")

Passing It Down

Here's the wonderful part: children are naturals at this. Watch a little one hand a friend the best toy truck, or proudly show a visitor "my room!" and you'll see *hachnasat orchim* in action. Whether you're

a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, teacher, or family friend, the kids in your life are watching how you treat guests. They learn this value best by seeing it and doing it. A few easy ways to practice together:

- **Let kids be the greeters.** When guests arrive, give a child the job of opening the door and saying, “Welcome! Come in!” Bonus points for a big smile.
- **Offer something.** Even little ones can offer a cup of water or a plate of crackers, just like Abraham. Kids love having an important job.
- **Think about the guest.** Ask, “What would make our friend feel happy here?” Maybe it’s sharing a favorite game or saving them a seat.
- **Welcome the new face.** Say hello to someone you don’t know yet at school, the playground, or the J. Every friendship starts with one “hi.”
- **Say goodbye warmly.** Our tradition teaches walking guests out the door, too. A wave from the window counts!

Why It Matters

When we welcome others, we show that every person matters, that kindness is something we do, not just something we feel, and that our homes (and our hearts) have room to share. These are lessons that stay with us for a lifetime and get passed down, generation to generation. It’s also what we hope the EVJCC feels like for everyone who walks through our doors: an open tent.

With the weather finally cooling off, patio season is officially here in the Valley, which makes this the perfect week to open your tent a little wider. Invite someone over for dinner in the backyard. Let a little one play host. Say hello to the new face at the J. Run toward the people walking by, if not literally, then in spirit.

Abraham would be proud. And your guests will remember how it felt to be welcomed.

#ShabbatShalom