

Prepare the Table: The Value of Hiddur Mitzvah

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*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me. Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. **You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.** You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

There is one verse that has been playing again and again in my mind from Psalm 23.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

It struck me that perhaps this verse is not just about a braggadocious victory, where the fantasy of gloating before your enemies is fulfilled, where you get to sit before an abundant buffet overflowing with delicacies and delights, champagne, caviar... guacamole... while your bullies look on, consumed with jealousy, humiliation and regret. "If only we'd been nicer to her, we too could be eating at that sumptuous charcuterie!"

I realized the verse may have more to teach us. It's instructive, teaching us a way we might overcome our enemies... our enemies being our anxieties, our stress, our doubts, fears, bad habits, harmful traits, stubbornness, impatience, greed, closemindedness, temper.

Preparing a table keeps our demons away.

I think about how my mother sets a table, whether for a dinner party, or one of her famous Grand Happy Hours, or even just a social visit. Paper plates, paper bowls, plasticware... NEVER! A friend drops over for a chat, and out come vegetables and crackers fanned out on antique amber crystal, hummus and whipped feta in art glass bowls, Fresca poured into wineglasses, purple and gold napkins.

And all that extra care, all that attention to detail, transforms every gathering into something meaningful, important. People don't want to leave. They want to stay immersed in beauty and love, and when they do leave, they take with them a sense of having been part of something wonderful. Their souls are nourished, and their hearts are bonded. Everlasting friendships are forged over Trader Joe's chicken meatballs served on a scalloped jade cake stand.

There was a moment, this summer, when I became worried there may be too many visitors for my Dad when he was convalescing after chemo, and my Dad said to me, "You know Zoe, you create a warm loving environment and people want to stay. And that's why angels come here too."

And I could feel the truth in his words. Judaism teaches this. In the Torah, when Abraham saw three men approaching the tent, he ran to greet them. He gave them water and invited them to rest in the shade. Sarah kneaded cakes for them, and together they prepared a multicourse meal for the strangers. They turned strangers into guests, and the guests turned out to be angels.

In the Talmud it is written: *Hospitality toward guests is greater than receiving the Divine Presence.*

How could anything be greater than receiving the Divine Presence?

Talmud points out that at the time Abraham saw the three strangers, he had been talking with God. But upon seeing the strangers, Abraham asked God to wait while he tended to his guests. He put the Divine Presence on hold.

Hospitality toward guests is greater than receiving the Divine Presence because in welcoming the other we create sanctuary, and to that sanctuary also come angels.

Perhaps that is why God is called the God of Hosts. Not just God over the hosts of stars in heaven, but the God of those who host. To host is to emulate God.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

God prepared a table to welcome us into this world. Jacaranda, hydrangea, trees ornamented with blossoms and fruit, sunsets, sparkling sands, waterfalls, bluebirds and goldfinches, loamy soil, mountains mirrored in lakes... God prepared a table for us, and we often take it for granted, even shut it out, so walled up from receiving. Worse, we often, explicitly or implicitly, contribute to ransacking and

destroying the table God prepared for us. Humanity has not been the guest that turns into an angel. Humanity has set the table on fire. Instead of bringing angels, we've brought demons.

God prepared a table for us, to ward off our demons, to disarm our enemies, to invite our better angels in. God took a molten planet, draped a mantle over it like a tablecloth, set a tablescape of forestry, flower arrangements, fairy starlight, overflowing ocean cups with fresh ice, and an atmosphere full of music and oxygen, and we, like teenagers who always have something more important to do than to just sit for a while, we grab what we want off the table and go, rushing away.

When my parents have guests, whether they are invited guests or people who just stop by for a drink, the drink usually turns into happy hour, which becomes Grand Happy hour which is where there are so many wonderful nibbles and dips it may as well be dinner, and soon the afternoon sun, like a pita chip, dips into the humus of the horizon, day becomes evening, and what started as a hello and a cocktail has turned into a game night, music, karaoke, four in the afternoon is now eleven p.m. *because you create a warm loving environment and people want to stay. And that's why angels come here too.*

How do we create spaces where people want to linger? Where people feel connection, joy. Where people feel seen and heard and loved.

Priya Parker in her book *The Art of Gathering* writes:

Everyone has the ability to gather well. You don't have to be an extrovert. In fact, some of the best gatherers I know suffer from social anxiety. You don't need to be a boss or a manager, you don't need a fancy house. The art of gathering fortunately does not rest on your charisma or the quality of your jokes. Gatherings crackle and flourish when real thought goes into them, when often invisible structure is baked into them, and when the host has a curiosity, willingness, and generosity of spirit to try.

We do this at Isaiah all the time. Long before any gathering, we bake into it an invisible stricture. And there are so many people who contribute to creating gatherings that crackle and flourish. Vacuuming the carpet, straightening the prayerbooks, putting out the candles and digging the wicks out of the wax,

adjusting the lighting, rolling out the tables, arranging the chairs, stationing people as greeters, thinking about conversation prompts, determining the order of a service, choreographing the flow, rehearsing the band, creating an atmosphere full of music.

I loved this year when Rabbi Dara said to the staff, let's have fun with Superbowl Sunday, and have football paraphernalia in the social hall for when the K12 families come for bagels before the kids go to class. And so we did, and we spent time thinking about what tchotchkes to get, we spent time preparing the tables, hanging Philadelphia Eagles and Kansas Chiefs banners, making it festive and fun. And then at 9:15 a.m. or 9:20 a.m. a crowd of people swept in, laughed, talked sports, bonded, grabbed bagels, and ten, fifteen minutes later, the kids were off to class. It was so much fun we did it again on May 4 which was on a Sunday this year. Decorated the whole social hall in Star Wars theme (May the Fourth be with you), prepared the tables, families swept in, kids played with mini lightsabers, and ten, fifteen minutes later, it was over. We did it for Purim too.

And for a moment one Sunday I wondered, is it worth it? All the time and effort put in for fifteen minutes of color and connection? Absolutely.

This past year we also had an art show, featuring the artworks of temple members. Temple members transformed the social hall into an art gallery, and it was a huge undertaking for a single night of wine and cheese and viewing the art, and was it worth it? Oh, one hundred percent. It was incredible.

Our theme this year is Hiddur Mitzvah, beautifying the commandments, the concept of performing mitzvot not just in a rote, perfunctory way, but with beauty. A beautiful etrog for sukkot. A beautiful mezuzah on your doorpost. Beautiful Shabbat candlesticks. Setting a beautiful Passover table. And it's not just about objects, but actions as well, and fostering beauty in relationships and the world around us.

The Navajo people have a concept called Hózhó which is living in harmony with oneself, others, and the environment, and as an expression of Hózhó, instead of goodbye, Navajo people will often say, "walk in beauty".

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

In the Talmud, Rabbi Elazar said:

A person should always set his table on Shabbat eve with all the preparations for an important feast, even if he only needs the table set for an olive-bulk of food. And Rabbi Hanina said: A person should always set his table at the conclusion of Shabbat, Saturday night, for a feast in deference to the Shabbat that passed, even if he only needs the table set for an olive-bulk of food.

In other words, Hiddur Mitzvah and preparing a table is not just about hospitality to others. It is for you. Even if you are eating alone. Even if all you have is an olive-bulk of food. It is possible still to make it beautiful. To linger in appreciation of the changing sky through the window. Make a centerpiece of green leaves, pinecones and acorns. Say a prayer.

These small acts help to chase away our enemies, sadness, loneliness, loss. Prepare a table to dispel our ghosts.

The Talmud also teaches: *The mitzvah of the Chanukah candle is an extremely dear one. Even if one does not have anything to eat except from charity, he borrows, or he sells his clothes and gets oil and candles and lights.*

What an incredible mandate to bring beauty into your life! Lighting the Chanukah candles is not a mitzvah that is found in the Torah, it was added much later. And here, the sages are saying that even if you are hungry, you should still work to secure lights for the festival!

Yea though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death you are with me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Even here, in the valley of the shadow, even amidst the hunger, fear, pain, confusion, we can find light, create beauty.

In the sixteenth century Rabbi Joseph Karo created a practical guide for Jewish law, and he decided to name the essential resource the Shulchan Aruch, which means the “Set Table” because it was so comprehensively and beautifully arranged.

The set table turns chaos into order. Entropy into redemption.

Another teaching from Talmud says:

Two ministering angels accompany a person on Shabbat evening from the synagogue to his home, one good angel and one evil angel. And when that person

reaches home and finds a lamp burning and a table set and his bed made, the good angel says: May it be Your will that it shall be like this for another Shabbat. And the evil angel answers against his will: Amen.

And if the person's home is not prepared for Shabbat in that manner, the evil angel says: May it be Your will that it shall be so for another Shabbat, and the good angel answers against his will: Amen.

We take the time to prepare, to straighten up, set up, create, beautify, and habituate ourselves to do it again, and again. We start with the lamp, the set table, the made bed, and over time we are creating warm, loving environments where people and angels want to linger. Over time we are not just setting tables, we are setting the stage for a most fulfilling life.

You've welcome me into the life of this community for the past 25 years, and every one of you, with your unique wavelength, your unique color and song, has beautified and enriched my life in countless ways. Many of you have shared your personal stories and struggles with me, and I treasure those confidences like rare jewels. Your honesty and vulnerability has allowed me not only to see how beautiful you are, but to appreciate how much beauty there is in humanity, if only we relearn how to access it. How to prepare a table before our enemies. A table, not a missile, or a barricade, or a trap, a table.

Rabbi Karyn Kedar wrote in her new book *Unfolding*:

*If we are to be saved, then it is by beauty.
By quiet thoughts and stormy reflection
and sustained moments of contemplation.*

*...And by nature. Nature is redemptive.
The mountain reach, the wooded path, the secret spring,
the flicker of light and shadow upon the leaves...
and the sea, which rocks us like our mothers once did...*

*And if we are to be redeemed then it is
...by accepting the invitation
of an empty chair to tarry by an open window.*

*And in the quiet moments
finding our way to an open heart.*

If we are to be saved.

Welcome to the new year. Come in, and make yourself comfortable. It is no trouble at all, in fact, having you here is greater even than receiving the Divine Presence. Can I pour you a drink? Cheers. *L'chayim*. To this life and this moment. Linger with me as long as you like. And when the time comes that you need to continue on your way, dear friend, walk in beauty. Walk in beauty. Amen.