



It's More than a Poster, It's an Opportunity **Being a Welcoming Presence**

Background for the Teacher

Genesis 18:1-8 is the quintessential Jewish text about being welcoming, and the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim* (welcoming guests.) It is the story of the patriarch, Abraham and three angels who come to visit him. You may also be familiar with a *midrash* (expository text) on this story that suggests that Abraham was so eager to be welcoming that his tent was open on all sides so he could watch for guests coming from any direction.

You can use this Torah text in (at least) three different ways:

1. As a model for the way you welcome students into your classroom
2. As a model for the way students might behave in the synagogue setting, and
3. As a vehicle to teach the concept of *hachnasat orchim*

Details for each of these ideas follow.

The Teacher as Welcomer: Emulating Abraham in the Classroom

- Stand outside the classroom door as students enter and greet each one by name. If there are late-comers, greet them by name, too, if it doesn't upset the flow of your lesson. Remember the words of the sage Shammai: "Greet each person with a cheerful countenance." (*Mishnah Avot* 1:15).
- Though you will likely not "bow low" as students arrive, there may be some other gesture you might employ: a high five, a pat on the shoulder, "air applause," etc.
- Abraham made his visitors physically comfortable, inviting them to remove their shoes. How can you make your students more physically comfortable? Is there room in your space for rugs or pillows? Could you start your day with an activity that might leave them physically refreshed, such as five minutes of yoga?
- Abraham and Sarah provided their guests with a meal. You will likely not be serving food daily in your classroom, but you might have a pitcher of water or allow students to bring water bottles so that they can drink without interrupting the flow of the lesson.
- Escort your students out. Walk them to the door, say goodbye, give them a high five or a shoulder pat on the way out, and tell them you're looking forward to seeing them again.
- Think about what it might mean to "have an open tent" or to welcome students from all four directions. Can classroom art be seen from all spots in the room? Are all necessary materials physically accessible to all students? Do you employ different teaching techniques to reach all learners?

Try this!

On the first day of class, set up your classroom like Abraham's tent. Hang a sheet across the door and/or along the walls. Push desks or chairs away and place a rug on floor. Ask students to remove their shoes (but keep the socks on!). Have them sit on the rug and serve them something simple and refreshing: water or juice, fruit, pita bread. Use the setting as a springboard for a conversation about being welcoming and the atmosphere you'd like to create for the school year.



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Using the Poster

The Student as Welcomer and Guest: Appropriate Synagogue Behavior

1. Read *Bereshit* (Genesis) 18:1-8 with the students.
2. Read the words on the poster with the students.
3. Write the words "welcomer" and "guest" on the whiteboard/blackboard or poster paper. Ask students to delineate words or behaviors in the text and poster that show appropriate behavior in either setting.
4. Ask: Are there differences in the way a guest and a host behave? Are there similarities?
5. What is our role in the synagogue? When are we welcoming? Whose guests are we? How do these different roles affect how we act in the synagogue?

Hachnasat Orchim

1. Read *Bereshit* 18:1-8 with the students and ask students to identify the steps Abraham and Sarah took to make their guests feel welcomed.
2. Work with the students to generate ideas as to how they might make another student feel comfortable in their synagogue or religious school classroom. Would they do anything differently for an adult? Use the poster as a reference and/or for idea starters.
3. How would they welcome someone to their home? Would welcoming someone to a home be the same or different as welcoming someone to the classroom or synagogue?
4. Are there universal lessons to learn from the students' ideas?
5. You might ask students to act out their ideas for both home and synagogue.

Class-building

- Ask students to choose a word on the poster that describes one thing they hope to do in class this year.
- Post a series of post-it type poster paper on the walls of your classroom with one word prompts such as: learn, know, explore, do, understand, etc. Give students markers and ask them to write one word on each poster corresponding to the prompt. Choose a few of their responses and discuss as a class.
- Ask students to point out the different ways to say hello or welcome that are highlighted on the poster. Sitting in a circle, ask each student to say his or her first name and a greeting, the next person should repeat that student's name and greeting before introducing themselves and adding a greeting of their own. This should continue around the circle until everyone has taken a turn. If you choose, you can end by asking the first person to try to recite everyone's name and greeting.
- Ask students to point out the different ways to say hello or welcome that are highlighted on the poster. Ask students to teach other greetings they might know from other languages and cultures. You may want to research some ahead of time or research simple facts about the Jewish communities in places where the greetings your students are likely to know are used; students can often say "hello" in Spanish, French and Chinese, among other languages. [This video](#) shows greetings in many, many languages. It might inspire your class to make a video of their own.
- Write a learning covenant with your students. Encourage them to incorporate words from the poster into their statements.
- Many classes incorporate ritual to help students regulate and find a sense of self and place inside of the classroom. These might include the way the teacher greets the class, saying a short prayer, etc. Work with students to create a class motto to be recited at the beginning of each class session.