

ROSH HASHANAH 5772 -- First Day

Rabbi Jon Spira-Savett

Temple Beth Abraham

Shabbat: The Secret Treasures of Eating Together

Over the past year, I have been making a very careful study of tables. It's a simple comparison, between two types of tables: round ones and rectangular ones. That's the only variable in my study. It doesn't matter if the tables are made of fine rosewood or plastic, if they came from Ethan Allen or Costco. If the legs are straight or curved, if the chairs match the table, not important. Round vs. rectangular -- that's all.

I'm not really interested in the tables per se. It's the people around the tables and what they do that intrigues me. And I've come to one overall conclusion: Rectangular tables are one of the world's greatest inventions.

I've watched people interact around round tables and rectangular ones. Here's what I have found. Round tables of eight or more people make group conversation hard. The people across from you are really far away. But rectangular tables put you close to a lot of people, even where there are eight or more. And if you ever watch an extended meal at a long rectangular table, or where a bunch of those tables are arranged end to end, it's remarkable. No matter who starts where, people end up sliding back and forth, talking to different people.

Most of my research is on Shabbat. So I didn't write it down, and I can't prove to you that all of this is statistically significant. But I'm committed to my conclusion, that the rectangular table is one of the world's most important inventions.

And I think I know who came up with it: our ancestors Sarah and Avraham. It was part of a larger patent, on an even greater innovation. In Hebrew I'd call it *seudah* -- sharing meals with guests.

You may have noticed that meals were part of both the Torah reading and the Haftarah this morning. These meals were not just there for background, to liven up the story. I know what they say about the holidays, that they're all: They tried to kill us, we won, let's eat. But the "let's eat" -- the table, rectangular or otherwise -- is not just for decoration or for fun. I want to talk with you about the spirituality of hospitality. I want to make the case that sharing meals with people beyond our own family, especially on Shabbat

and holy days, is in fact a profound spiritual practice. It's about family and friends, and about building community -- and even more.

I've already used the Hebrew term *seudah* (pronounced *se-oo-dah*). It can refer to a meal, as opposed to a snack. But usually we use the word for a special meal -- a meal for an occasion, shared by many people. A feast. A meal eaten at one or more rectangular tables.

Our Torah reading today mentioned the great feast that Avraham and Sarah threw when Yitzchak was weaned, when Sarah no longer had to nurse him. When you look in the commentaries, you find something interesting. There are a couple of questions you could ask about a big feast. One is the menu -- but the rabbis didn't pick up on that.

Instead, they were curious about the other question: who was there? This was the guest list, according to the midrash: Avimelech, king of the Philistines; thirty other kings of nearby cities, each escorted by his military chief; and among them Og, king of Bashan, who could eat more than any person in the world.

Through this whimsical description, the rabbis are actually making a serious point about the power of *seudah*, of feasting together in someone's home. When I read that midrash, I noticed first of all that none of these people were Sarah and Avraham's friends and relatives.

We tend to think of our important relationships in a few categories. There is our family -- parents, siblings, husband or wife or partner, children, extended family. There are our good friends -- people we confide in and rely on, who we meet at different times of life and who stay by our side. There are coworkers and teammates -- people we see regularly because of work, or an activity, people we're working with on a specific goal or task.

But the Shabbat table adds another kind of relationship, one I'm not sure we even have a good name for. For me, the best example is called Colin.

I met Colin during my first year of rabbinical school. A lot of us were brand new to the Seminary, and had families very far away -- Colin was from London. Within a short time, Colin and his wife, and Laurie and I, became part of a set of people who started having Shabbat dinner together regularly. Many of you remember another member of that group, Jacob Herber, who served here as a rabbi for the High Holy Days some years ago.

The point is this: I went to school with Colin, and eventually Colin and I worked together in a day school. In class, I didn't really care for Colin. I didn't enjoy being in class with him. His religious outlook was pretty different from mine, and he wasn't fun to argue with. Then at the day school, I didn't enjoy working together. He had certain set ideas, a lot of self-confidence -- and in fact, he was very good. But it was hard to collaborate.

If we had just been in school together, even for the common purpose of studying Torah or becoming rabbis -- or if we had just worked together -- we wouldn't have liked each other. But because we ate Shabbat meals together, we were friends. And the truth is, I learned so much from Colin through the years we ate together. Instead of arguments in class, we talked about Conservative Judaism for hours and hours in an unending conversation. I learned to look at Americans and American Jews from a different angle, through his British eyes. I learned new customs and rituals, some of which have become a part of our home and our Seder. I got a different lens into his thinking about our day school, which we both cared about. And we loved to sing together.

What do you call that kind of person? I think of Colin as a *chaver seudah*, a feast-friend. It's a different kind of friend, one that you might discover uniquely around a Shabbat table. You probably have a friend like that. Someone who drives you nuts, or who you argue with all the time about politics or religion. Someone you care about and learn from, even if you wouldn't necessarily trust them with your life. Or maybe after enough Shabbat meals, you would.

The Shabbat table creates a relationship that is different from pure friendship, even if you only meet someone once or occasionally around that table. Around the Shabbat table, you can learn things about other people, and from them, without having to commit to a deeper friendship. There is wisdom that's shared around the Shabbat table. It's become one of my mantras: tribal wisdom. It's the kind of wisdom that comes in the form of stories. It's not the pat or packaged answers of self-help books or parenting guides. It's more like the Talmud, a flow of opinions and views, culled from many sources. Expressed in reference to something that happened in real life. Or expressed in the name of someone who heard it in the name of someone else.

There is a certain kind of talk that happens when you have time to sit together, without hurrying off somewhere. Conversations are like a good

soup, a ratatouille, a *cholent*. When you start off, everything's a bit cold and raw, and maybe each ingredient stands by itself a bit too much, giving off its own aroma. But with enough time, with the warmth of closeness across the table and the easy heat from Shabbat candles, everything starts to simmer together. Flavors combine, sweetnesses are expressed. Sometimes, without anyone intending it, the conversation just makes its way to something profound. Some shares an experience from the week, or asks a question, or seeks an opinion.

If you talk with people long enough, eventually a leisurely conversation will take itself somewhere meaningful. You reveal as much or as little about yourself as you like. Maybe, at a moment of quiet, a person will bring up something they've been thinking about. Maybe you come to rest on some common concern in your lives, about the rat race or the kids or your family far away. Or maybe you just feel immersed in the small wonder of someone you've seen casually in the community, and revel in their own fascination with what they do at work, or the hobby you didn't know they had. Or, maybe you're just reminded that each of us has an interesting story of how we got here -- decisions we made, the chances we took.

It's the mix of people, and it's time. On a regular night, in our regular space, our kids have to be in bed by a certain hour or everything goes crazy. You know what I'm talking about. But around the Shabbat table, or at a Seder, or before Havdalah, time flows differently. Miracles sometimes happen. The kids disappear. It turns out they didn't need quite as much help cutting up their food as we thought, or maybe we're just a little less compulsive about whether they ate enough. And they go off and play together, while the adults have time to talk.

The midrash says that one of the guests at Avraham and Sarah's feast was Avimelech, king of the Philistines. He was Avraham's adversary, as we read this morning. According to legend, some people suspected the Philistine king was Yitzchak's real father. That's a pretty unlikely combination -- why does the midrash put Avimelech at Avraham's table? To teach us: that our lives should be populated not only by our family and close friends, but by all kinds of other people who look most of the time like we would have nothing to do with them.

Who knows, maybe it was because they shared a *seudah* that Avimelech and Avraham could make peace and do business together. By the time the last years of rabbinical school rolled around, the Seminary was not a place of peace. People like Colin and me were often at odds and pretty bitterly

divided. It wasn't pleasant. But because we shared Shabbat together, Colin and I could talk without raising our voices. We found a way of being in the same school and the same movement, even though our disagreements were significant.

Now my Colin was a longtime *chaver seudah*; we exchanged a lot of meals. But the same thing seems to happen even on a shorter scale. I learned this from our friend Rachel. She lives out in Chicago, where she is the wife of Asher, an Orthodox rabbi. For a while she has put her own career in Jewish education on hold, because they have people over to their home almost every Shabbat. She's becoming something of an anthropologist of hospitality.

Rachel thinks that you don't have to try too hard to decide who should come to Shabbat dinner with who else. On one of our listservs this actually came up, and she wrote about what we might call "the difficult guest." What about the person you just don't think fits with anyone else you can think of? Of course, there is no such person in our community!... Rachel says that around her table, they have often been surprised when someone they just couldn't figure out who to match with, or who just seems downright antisocial and unpleasant, ends up randomly talking to whoever happens to be sitting next to them. Suddenly, Shabbat works its magic, and there's a connection. This is a kind of serendipity that can happen around a Shabbat table. It can bring new people through your life. It wouldn't happen if you stick only with people who are already the closest of friends.

Who else do we encounter around a Shabbat table? The midrash mentioned that Avraham and Sarah had thirty-one kings at the weaning *seudah*, along with their generals. Avraham was one hundred years old, so it's a good bet these kings and generals were much younger. The Shabbat table is a place where young and old, or a bit younger and a bit older, can be together.

Most of us in New Hampshire don't have those kinds of generations of our own families nearby. So we have to create our own mix of the generations. When Laurie and I have people over, we like to do this kind of social engineering. Not only to put together people who might have kids the same age, for example, but also to build connections that cross lines of age and experience.

What does it feel like to feed other people? The first meal that Sarah and Avraham served in the Torah was like this: Avraham was sitting at the opening of his tent with the sun high overhead. Avraham saw three figures standing out in the desert, and he ran toward them to invite them in. Sarah

grabbed some of the finest of the herd they had, and they brought the travelers into their home.

The people who came in were strangers, and Avraham and Sarah welcomed them in with no questions asked. They weren't protective about their privacy; they had no notion that inside here is my place only. One midrash says that Avraham's and Sarah's home in fact had no walls to divide it from the outside.

Most of us know people whose home is truly open. Who have guests over for dinner all the time, who have people staying over on a regular basis. There is a basic lack of selfishness and self-centeredness, and less self-consciousness about having the house be just so before anyone can come in. I admire my own parents as they tell me of more and more new people they have met at their shul, gotten acquainted with, and invited over for Shabbat dinner. Or the list of people through the years who have stayed in my bedroom, friends who have left town and are passing through, or friends of friends who need a place.

There is a basic attitude some people have: we're always prepared to welcome. I was talking once with my friend Menashe, who lives in a very religious community outside of Jerusalem. He had a few kids at the time, and they were expecting another, and finances were tight. I said something to him -- that must be tough to plan, to think about how to raise another baby, especially with other little kids around. Menashe kind of shrugged and said: You know, we'll just pull up another chair.

The Torah says that the gathering Sarah and Avraham had at Yitzchak's weaning was a *mishteh gadol*, a great feast. Food flowed freely. Remember Og, king of Bashan? He was able by legend to eat more than anyone else in the world, yet there was enough for him along with the other thirty kings and their burly army chiefs. There is a tradition we still observe that when you're having a *bris* for a new baby boy, you don't invite specific people but rather announce the *bris*, and everyone comes. That's how bountiful you feel, how bountiful you become.

At the moment when Sarah is losing her ability to feed Yitzchak, Sarah and Avraham discover that they have a bounty that is even greater than their family. It's almost God-like. They discover that they can play the role of God, they can be the vehicle for making God's blessings apparent to others. It's not an exaggeration to say that the weaning feast is like manna from heaven.

When we feed each other, we tap into a certain kind of *chesed*, a life-giving power, and we experience that in fellowship. It's not like buying dinner at a restaurant and being thankful that we can afford it. A home engaged in *hachnasat orchim*, in bringing in guests, enters a different realm. We use the word "spread" to describe a table or buffet laid out with all kinds of food. It's the perfect word -- we are really spreading out ourselves, bursting forth in our own ability to provide and be a source of bounty.

I never really understood this until we hosted a *seudah* when our children were born. I remember sitting down to compose a D'var Torah for Lela's *simchat bat*, the celebration of her birth. I was trying to find words to express a feeling of bursting out -- that this child was so much blessing that we just had to enlarge ourselves, to spread out in a room with people, in order just to begin to express it. One way we do that is by enlarging our circle of hospitality -- having a *mishteh gadol*, a big feast. When our caterer ended up running low on food, it felt like a catastrophe. Not that people would go hungry; any of them could duck out later to grab a bite. But we were feeling so bountiful, so large, and wanted that to be the experience of all our guests.

It's one of the ways you feel when you host a Shabbat dinner. Just putting out more food than we would feed to our own family makes us feel blessed, and like pipelines of God's blessing out to others.

Avraham and Sarah were not just celebrating their son's hitting a milestone in his development. For Sarah, there had been this intimate connection with Yitzchak. The closeness of breastfeeding. The ability to satisfy completely his needs. Maybe Avraham felt something similar, as the protective father of his young child. When Yitzchak no longer needed that -- when Sarah couldn't do that anymore -- his parents felt a certain emptiness and loneliness. Who ever heard of a weaning feast? Their feast flowed from a spiritual need to reach out, at exactly that moment when Sarah especially was experiencing a diminishing of connection. When her life stopped being feeding and caring, naturally and all the time.

In our culture, in America, we suffer even unknowingly from a great deal of isolation. Look at how we live, compared with the America of the 1950s or even the 1970s. The sociologist Robert Putnam wrote in his book *Bowling Alone* that from 1975 to 2000, the amount of times Americans either visited another person's home, or had someone else in their home, dropped by 40-50%. For various reasons, we are becoming more separated and more

private. Our homes are farther away from one another -- from people in our community, even from our next door neighbor sometimes. They are the opposite of Avraham's and Sarah's tent. Our privacy settings are set very strictly.

But interestingly, according to a sociologist at Berkeley named Claude Fischer (who happens to be Jewish), people are not actually spending less time with others. Instead, these get-togethers are taking place at nobody's house -- at Starbucks, in bars, at restaurants. There's nothing bad about that. But it's not the same. There's the noise of the background music, which makes conversation difficult. There is the need to cut short so the next group can be seated. And there's the bill we divide evenly, rather than the generosity of the home.

Avraham and Sarah were like many of us right here, nomads who moved from place to place. It would have been easy for them not to make any roots, and live privately until the time came to move to the next place. Instead, they created a different definition of home.

We need more *seudah*, more special meals, and more *hachnasat orchim*, more bringing in of guests, in our lives. The meals that Avraham and Sarah made always come against the backdrop of some kind of loss, something missing. When Avraham lost his son Yishmael to the desert, and realized that his own family was divided, and he needed to do *teshuvah*, one of his first steps was to set up a place among the Philistines, where he could offer meals and share them with people.

If our society is becoming more fragmented; if our Jewish community is getting too spread out, and divided into pockets by age or generation -- then the natural answer is to gather more. Not just here at the synagogue. But around tables for Shabbat dinners, or lunch after services, or on Saturday evening to light the Havdalah candle.

There are all kinds of ways to do this. All it takes to create the special atmosphere on a Friday night is to light two candles, say a blessing over wine and grape juice, and another over challah. What shall we make? I know Laurie and I always think we have to do something different and new, but our friend Rachel told us she makes the same thing over and over. She has kid-tested it on her four little ones, and she cranks it out the same way each time. Her teaching: it's not the food, it's the people.

You don't have to make chicken or matzo balls; even baked ziti is fine. You don't have to do it alone -- split the work, or do it pot luck! And it's not only about hosting. A lot of people work so hard, two people working full time, the house isn't really in good shape for company, there are health issues or other limitations. Being a guest -- being a *chaver seudah*, company at a feast -- is also so important. Avraham's and Sarah's first guests looked like people, but they turned out to be messengers from God. That's part of the magic of Shabbat or Havdalah together: It's not who invites whom, who is the giver and who is the receiver. The host and guest are both channels for God.

There are some tables in homes in this community, or couches and chairs, where all of this happens on Shabbat on a regular basis. Already, there are plans for more -- in Hollis and Amherst, in Nashua, and across the river. By the time we come back next week, we hope to have a date to announce Shabbat dinners all over, and a growing list of hosts. You'll have the opportunity to sign up to be a host, or a guest.

May this be a year of more *seudah*, and all the blessings of generosity, wisdom, and community among us all.

Shana tova!