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### INSPIRATION

# Hachnasat Orchim: To Sit at Henny Machlis' Table

**Rabbi Eliyahu Safran**

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Henny Machlis visiting Camp HASC.  
(Judah Mischel)

When we first learn that “Noach was righteous in his generation...” we applaud his stature until the rabbis, on deeper reflection, note that “in his generation” suggests that the bar was fairly low for righteousness when he lived. Abraham, however, is said to have been “righteous” without any qualification. He was truly righteous, in *any* crowd.

What made Abraham such a “stand out?” What was his

greatest gift? His faith? His willingness to heed God’s call and to leave his home and family in pursuit of the destiny God promised? When that promise was finally fulfilled, in his old age, was it taking Isaac, his beloved son, to be sacrificed? His wisdom in insisting on paying for Sarah’s burial place, so that no man could ever suggest that our first stake in the promised land had not been duly purchased? Or was it exemplified that hot day in Mamre, when he welcomed the three strangers to his tent?

Our sages deem the welcoming of the stranger to our homes to be amongst the greatest of *mitzvos*. Abraham and Sarah created a home filled with such *chesed* and *rachamim*. Their home was filled with devotion and joy, a place that epitomized *shalom bayit*.

For generations, we have held out the example of our great patriarch and matriarch as the ideal, the impossible model for this foundational mitzvah. And yet, my wife Clary and I, along with thousands and thousands of others, have known the blessing and the joy of experiencing what must have been a feeling similar to Abraham's guests when we were welcomed to the home of Henny Machlis.

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My wife and I always spend the month of Tishrei in Jerusalem. Each year, as surely as the new moon arrives, my beloved friend Rabbi Mordechai Machlis asks that we join their Simchat Beit Hashoeva on Sukkot. But not just that, he invites me with the honor of sharing *divrei Torah* with those who come to celebrate in this unique and incomparable house and sukkah of boundless love, compassion and *rachamim*.



Clary Safran and Henny Machlis at a Simchat Beit Hashoeva at the Machlis Sukkah in Jerusalem.

To be completely honest, though I felt the fullness of the honor he sought to give me, I hesitated. To stand at a podium at the level of the Machlis household was, in truth, to be called upon to deliver a *d'var Torah* in the home of Abraham and Sarah! I felt unworthy for such an honor; inadequate for such a role. What insight, what wisdom could I add to the truth experienced by the tens of thousands of guests who had passed through their home?

And so, I always demurred. But last year before Sukkot, Rav Mordechai Machlis personally came to me. He pleaded with me. “Please,” he asked, “a *d’var Torah* from you would mean so much...” How could I refuse? I could not. And so I devoted a great deal of time, thinking of the words I could speak, the lesson I could teach, the truth I could pass along.

I came to inspire. But it was I who was inspired.

I came to uplift, but I was the one raised in spirituality and emotion.

I came to teach, but it was I who learned.

I focused my remarks on the “*daled minim*,” the four species of the Sukkot. Each, as we know, has unique characteristics. The etrog, taste and aroma; the arava, none. The hadas... The lulav... And so it was, making it clear that despite the gifts and characteristics of the individual elements, it was only when combined as a unified whole that the lulav, etrog, hadasim and aravot can be used to fulfill the mitzvah of Sukkot.

As I spoke, I looked around at the people who had come to gather at the Machlis home. There before me, I saw the personification of my lesson. All Jews together. *Frum*, modern Orthodox, Reform, unaffiliated, questioning and in rebellion. There were no judgments. All felt the warmth of the Machlis home equally; all were equally loved and welcomed.

At that moment, I felt my heart fill to near bursting, sensing what it would feel like to live in Messianic times.

My *d’var Torah* was filled with my deeply-felt words and lessons; however the Machlis home had already taken the lessons and brought them to the fullness of life. They took the truth of my words and transformed them into flesh.

When we left that evening, the Abramsons, friends who had joined Clary and me clearly felt what I had felt. “Did you ever see and observe such love shared with every kind of Jew found on this earth?”

I could not answer, only nod my head in agreement and awe.

“Every type of Jew adored, respected and loved. No one judged.  
Every one embraced.”

Again, I had no words. Not that any were necessary. The aura of that moment continued with us for a long, long while.

Once again, this past Sukkot, just a handful of weeks ago, I was asked to deliver a *d'var Torah*. But I could not bring myself to speak. Not this time. But this time, my reticence had nothing to do with any sense of worthiness. This year, my reticence was because the great *Tzadikah* Henny Machlis, long-suffering had been brought so close to the end of her earthly journey and I could not bear to see her suffer so. To me, it was inconceivable and overwhelming that this woman, this *force of nature*, who had made so many thousands of Jews feel welcomed and at home, could have been so weakened.

She had fought for a long while against her illness, always with grace, faith and sweetness. I wanted to remember her enormous smile as it had radiated the previous Sukkot, even knowing that her body was already being devoured by her illness. I wanted to hold tight to the image of her just last year, standing in our home alongside one of her devoted and loving daughters, surrounded by all of my dreidels. I wanted to remember her even though, *even then* I had to turn away as she uttered a fervent prayer with total and absolute faith, asking that she and all others in need be worthy of miracles, represented by the countless dreidels and *with the very same breath* wishing miracles for our household.

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A number of commentators have written about Henny Machlis since she sadly passed away. They have noted that the Machlis' *chesed* was not restricted to Shabbat. Nor was it extended only to “proper” guests. Their welcoming was extended to religious Jews, unaffiliated Jews, tourists, the homeless, recovering (and barely recovering) drug users. It was not unusual to find homeless people sleeping on their couches, some for weeks at a time!

They took care that those guests whose mental instability might pose a potential danger to their fourteen children slept outside the house, in the family van. Rabbi Machlis has related that he would know the number of “guests” accommodated in the van when he left for his teaching position in the morning by the pairs of shoes in the windshield!

There was food and comfort for all, whether ten, twenty, eighty or two hundred. Somehow, more places were set, more chairs found and more food kept coming from the kitchen. However, as Techiya Levine wrote in a posting on Aish.com, it was more than the amount of food that distinguished the Machlis household, it was the “...abundance of joy, love, respect and wisdom. The amount of light that emanates from that small home is blinding.”

She continued by listing just some of the life-changing lessons Henny Machlis embodied. She learned that it is possible to live in a near-constant state of joy. Imagine, a joy-driven life! Such must have been the way Sarah oversaw her household. To those who scoff at the possibility of such a state of joy, Henny Machlis pointed out, by example, the way. Such joy comes directly from being *a giver*.

If you ever feel down, reach out to someone else rather than hope someone reaches out to you. You will be amazed at how good you will feel.

We live in a hyper-critical age, yet Henny Machlis exemplified the possibility of only seeing the good in others and that everyone is precious. Whether family, friend, stranger, observant Jew or cynic, she made you feel beloved and welcome.

Even with fourteen children of her own and more than one hundred dinner guests, she always made time to learn Torah.

Despite her incredible kindness to so many people, Henny made sure that her family knew that they came first. She did this while teaching them to become givers themselves. How? There was a small, family Shabbat meal before they hosted the many, many guests, a meal when the focus and attention could be solely on the children. Seders too were small, family affairs. Henny made sure everyone who needed was accommodated at a seder, but that special meal was always smaller in the household.

She always showed respect and love for her husband, a unique *Tzadik* in his own right. Regardless of the number of guests or how much had to be done, she always stopped and sat to listen to her husband share words of Torah.

There is always more room and food. Limits have a funny way of stretching when they need to!

\* \* \*

Such grace. Such kindness. Such strength. It is so difficult to imagine that this wonderful woman is no longer with us. But her flame continues to shine.



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