



Hiddur Mitzvah

Enhancing Mitzvot

For any meeting:

My Beautiful XXX . . .

This can be the divrei hokhmah for more than one meeting. You can even do this throughout the year – one example per meeting. Ask a member to bring a ritual object for the holiday nearest your scheduled meeting.

Directions: Before your meeting, ask a member to bring a treasured Jewish ritual object that has special meaning for her. Perhaps it is something that she received from a family member or for an

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Tishrei: Ushpizot

(This may take a few more minutes, but is a thought-provoking exercise.)

Introduction: A kabbalistic practice that has gained in popularity today is to invite seven *ushpizin* (Aramaic for guests) into the Sukkah. The original seven are: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron and David, who are invited, one per night, into the sukkah to join in the week-long holiday celebration. Recently, Jewish feminists have expanded the custom to include women as well, calling them in the feminized form, *ushpizot*. The recommended selection of ushpizot is

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Sholem Aleichem: On Being Considerate

Introduction: Some rabbis understood *hiddur mitzvah* to include personal relations (*mitzvot bein adam lechavero*), that we treat our fellow humans with honor and respect. In this short humorous piece by Shalom Aleichem* – the quintessential “expert” on human behavior – he takes regard for other’s feelings to the extreme.

*(*Shalom Aleichem was the pen name for Solomon Rabinovich, b. 1859 in the Ukraine; he was sometimes called the Jewish Mark Twain.)*

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2011-2012

INTRODUCTION

This year, 2011-2012, Women’s League and Torah Fund share the theme *hiddur mitzvah* – beautifying or embellishing a mitzvah. Its precise meaning is subject to interpretation; everyone seems to have her own idea about what it means and so this year we will discuss it through some varied approaches.

It is generally accepted that the concept of *hiddur mitzvah* is derived from a midrash on *Shirat HaYam*, the Song of the Sea (Exodus): “This is my God and I will glorify Him” (*Zeh eli v’anveihu*). In this midrash the

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*A person should always be considerate of the feelings of his neighbors. . . . So, for instance, if I went out to the fair. . . and did well, sold everything at a profit, and returned with pocketsful of money, my heart bursting with joy, I never failed to tell my neighbors that I had lost every kopeck and was a ruined man. Thus I was happy and my neighbors were happy. But if, on the contrary, I had really been cleaned out at the fair and brought home with me a bitter heart and a bellyful of green gall, I made sure to tell my neighbors that never since God made fairs had there been a **better** one. You get my point? For thus I was miserable and my neighbors were miserable with me. . . .*

Discussion Questions: *What is Sholem Aleichem suggesting about the human condition?*

Would you call this realistic or cynical?

Sholem Aleichem: On Being Considerate

rabbis discuss: How is it possible for humans to glorify God? They answered: Through adorning the mitzvot by making pleasing ritual objects, through singing praises to God, through ethical and moral behavior that emulates God.

These *divrei hokhmah* are designed to invite further conversation about *hiddur mitzvah*.

Introduction

important milestone in her life. Ask her to speak briefly about:

Where did it come from?

What is special about it?

How has it enhanced her Jewish observance?

How often does she use it?

What does she plan to do with it in the future?

My Beautiful XXX . . .

based on the seven female prophets named in the Talmud: Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah, and Esther. In the talmudic passage each woman is associated with prophetic acts, but later they were invested with mystical symbolism by the medieval kabbalists.

Discussion Question: *If we were to create our own list of ushpizot, who might we want to invite into our sukkah?*

Give just a minute or two for recommendations, and then vote on a final list.

Tishrei: Ushpizot



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Challah

Introduction: *Tekhinot* are Yiddish prayers written for (and often by) women in eastern and central Europe throughout the early modern period. This tekhine was from a collection compiled in 1648. Listen to her petition.

“Lord of all the worlds, in your hands is all blessing. I come now to honor your holiness, and I pray you to give your blessings on what I bake. Send an angel to guard the baking, so that everything will be well baked, will rise nicely, and will not burn, to honor your holy Sabbath which you have chosen that your people Israel may rest

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Shevat: Environmentalism and Hiddur Mitzvah

Introduction: With the rise of the modern state of Israel, Zionists offered an additional layer of appreciation to the mid-winter observance of Tu B'Shevat. It became the day devoted to tree planting and reforestation, both important to the reclamation of the land. Modern day Jewish environmentalists regard this holiday as yet another way to commemorate Jewish stewardship of the earth.

One of the midrashim that is most often quoted by Jewish environmentalists reflects the rabbinic attitude toward stewardship of the land:

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Chanukkah: Judith – A Woman of Valor?

Introduction: *Chanukkiot* in central and Eastern Europe were decorated sometimes with an image of Judith. What do you think is the relationship between Judith and Chanukkah? (*Solicit answers before reading the next passage.*)

The apocryhal book of Judith (from the Second Temple period) relates how the young Israelite widow, determined to save her people, beguiles (for ulterior valiant motives) Holofores, the Assyrian general who was in charge of the troops laying siege to

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Show Deference to the Elderly

Introduction: In this passage Carol Ingall presents an entirely different understanding of *hiddur mitzvah*.

“Finding opportunities to embellish and seeing the possibility for beauty is yet another definition of *hiddur mitzvah*. How else can we understand the obligation of taking care of the elderly as *V'hadarta p'nei zaken?* (*show deference to the elderly?*) The verb contains the word *hadar*, which means beauty. We are commanded to find beauty in the faces of the elderly and to treat them as we would treat precious objects. While we love our children's and grandchildren's hand-

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Israel. One night while they are dining, Judith serves him salty cheese and then plies him with wine. When Holofernes has passed out drunk, Judith seizes his sword and cuts off his head, thus relieving her people from the siege. The story's intention is to teach that powerful foes can be defeated with the help of God. And, as with the Maccabees, spiritual strength begets physical strength.

As a result, Judith became a common figure on chanukkiot. Also, the Judith legend has led to the custom among some Jews of eating cheese and other dairy foods at Chanukkah.

Discussion Questions: *In this story a female hero first employs seduction (or the possibility of seduction) and then murder to accomplish her goals. Does the end justify the means?*

Does this model of female heroism still work?

Chanukkah: Judith – A Woman of Valor?

made tattered challah covers and grungy seder plates because they link us to our family history, there is also a place for the elegant and esthetic, the beauty that appeals to the soul, elevating and ennobling."

Discussion Questions: *How does Ingall define beauty?*

What are the challenges we face today with our graying society?

How can our sisterhood contribute something positive to this issue?

Show Deference to the Elderly

thereon, and over which one recites the holy blessing – as You blessed the dough of Sarah and Rebekah, our mothers. My Lord God, listen to my voice, for You are the one who hears the voices of those who call upon You with the whole heart. May You be praised to eternity."

Discussion Questions: *How does this prayer reflect the life of a Jewish woman several centuries ago?*

A woman could express piety/sanctity in household chores. She could connect with the matriarchs and Jewish tradition through the act of baking bread. Through the act of separating the challah and baking the Sabbath bread, she participated in a religious act that was tangible and visible.

What might a modern woman derive from this kind of prayer?

Challah

"When God created the first human beings, God led them around the Garden of Eden and said: "Look at my works! See how beautiful they are, how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one to repair it."

Kohelet Rabbah on Ecclesiaste 7:13

Discussion Questions: *How does this midrash connect the twin values of stewardship and hiddur mitzvah?*

What activities might we undertake as a sisterhood that would reflect both of these values?

Shevat: Environmentalism and Hiddur Mitzvah



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Pesach and the Kos Miryam

Introduction: The *kos miryam* has become an increasingly popular addition to the Passover seder. It is derived from the legend of Miriam's Well that appears in a number of midrashim. The rabbis propose the existence of this well by connecting the circumstances of Miriam's death in Numbers 20:1 with the account of the waters of Meribah (Numbers 20:2ff) that follows immediately. Based upon this connection, the rabbis surmise that Miriam's death resulted in the dearth of water, and they accredit to her the existence of a miraculous well that

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Is a Half-Hearted Mitzvah Still a Mitzvah?

Introduction: Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin writes about attitude in performing mitzvot.

"There are three ways to engage in a mitzvah: routinely, begrudgingly or whole-heartedly..."

Discussion Questions: *What are examples of each that might relate to you?* [solicit answers]

Are there any examples of "routine", "begrudging", or "whole-hearted" that make sense?

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Shavuot: Ladies First

Introduction: In an unusual departure from their generally unfavorable attitude toward women's capabilities, in this midrash the rabbis *seem* to suggest a different perspective.

Why were the women asked first whether they wish to receive the Torah? On the eve of Shavuot the Israelites stood at Mount Sinai, arranged with the men apart and the women apart. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses, "*Go, speak to the daughters of Israel, [asking them] whether they wish to receive the Torah.*" Why were the women asked first? Because the way of men

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Jewish Art: Is it Jewish...Is it art?

Begin with a general discussion of the question

Discussion Question: You are a member of the selection committee for the new director of a Jewish fine arts museum. You are down to two finalists:

Candidate A has graduate degrees in Bible and modern Jewish studies and has worked professionally as a Hebrew calligrapher.

Candidate B has a Master of Fine Arts in Dutch and Flemish art

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is to follow the opinion of women, as it is said, "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob" (Exodus 19.3); these are the women. "And declare to the children of Israel" (ibid.); these are the men. They all replied as with one mouth, and they said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do and obey." (ibid. 24.7)

Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer 41

Discussion Questions: *What are possible interpretations of this midrash?*

Women wield the power: if women accept the Torah the men will follow. This can mean that women are either persuasive or that they are manipulative.

How might women understand this midrash today and use it to their advantage?

Shavuot: Ladies First

from the Boston Institute of Fine Arts and leads a weekly Hebrew discussion group.

Which candidate is best for the job?

Jewish Art: Is it Jewish...Is it art?

accompanied the Israelites on their wanderings in the wilderness and provided them with drinking water.

"An objection was raised: R. Jose the son of R. Judah says: Three good leaders had arisen for Israel, namely: Moses, Aaron and Miriam and for their sake three good things were conferred upon Israel, namely the well, the pillar of cloud, and the manna. The well, for the merit of Miriam; the pillar of cloud for the merit of Aaron; the manna for the merit of Moses. When Miriam died the well disappeared, as it is said: And Miriam died there (Num 22:1) and immediately follows the verse: And there was no water for the congregation...."

BT Ta'anit 9a

Discussion: *There are those who argue that Moses is not mentioned in the Haggadah or during the seder so why should we include Miriam?*

Agree or disagree?

Pesach and the Kos Miryam

Does a mitzvah that is done begrudgingly worth it?

What does it mean to be whole-hearted?

Is it possible to perform all mitzvot in a whole-hearted way?

Is a Half-Hearted Mitzvah Still a Mitzvah?