

The week of Parashat Vayera is very apposite to say the few words which I want to share with you this evening.

First, it is the Bar Mitzvah sidrah of Ben Tobin. So thank you for organising this evening at such little notice with your customary vigour. And of course, happy birthday.

Second, it is the Sidrah par excellence about the Chesed of Avraham and especially the Mitzvah of Hachnasat Orchim. I hope that you will agree after the words that I say and a short video to follow that we are seeing people following in the best traditions of Avraham and fulfilling the Mitzvah of Hachanasat Orchim at this very distressing time for the Jewish people.

I want to tell you something about a new community in Neve Tzedek, and its efforts to provide hospitality and comfort to the displaced people from the South of Israel abutting the border with Gaza.

The Chaslat community was a product of Covid. It started literally in a strip of grass in the centre of Neve Tzedek not far from Anitas ice cream shop. Under the leadership of Rav Zvi Horvitz, a dynamic and optimistic Rabbi, whom you will see in the video to follow, it attracted a disparate community. Young families, retirees from around the world, people with holiday homes and some just looking for a home. Ashkenazim, Sephardim, Israelis and Olim, North Americans, South Americans, Europeans and some Brits.

And HGS has made a huge impact. Notably, Joe Ohrenstein and Sara. They donated a Sefer Torah in memory of Joe and Joy Conway. And we also have there as prime movers of the group our very own Helen and David Bender. And a project underway to restore an old shul. Daily minyanim. Monthly shabbat meals. Shiurim.

And then there was 7 October. And the whole focus changed from the building project to caring for the refugees from the South. And I mean refugees. We do not read about it in the newspapers, but the Israeli government estimates that there are 250,000 Israelis who have left their homes. They are likely to be there at least until January. But the project in Neve Tzedek reaches out to those who have lost their homes and their communities in the atrocities near the Gazan border.

A small group within the community got together. It started around a local hostel in Neve Tzedek focussing professional efforts and resources on a very disadvantaged group of people. The already established social circles pooled their collective specialisms. Paediatric psychotherapist, paediatric occupational therapist, oncologist, senior social worker, paediatric orthopaedic surgeon, podiatrist, a music/art teacher to name but a few.

They have been working round the clock as volunteers. In the early days, it was making hundreds and hundreds of sandwiches to feed the reservists, before the Government was able to feed them. As refugees arrived, some with only the clothes on their back, it was to get basic clothing and other provisions to them. Some members of the community provided their homes,

especially important for those such as cancer sufferers dependent on immune suppressants.

Children are provided breakfasts. Art and music therapy is being provided. Helen refers to harrowing stories begin to emerge. What Helen describes as classic symptoms of PTSD.

People suffering nightmares, uncontrollable crying wondering why they and not their closest family or friends are still alive.

The culmination of the week is a communal Shabbat meal put on at the shul for the displaced families, for 150 people. You will see from the film that this is not some soup kitchen, but is a dignified meal showing utter devotion and love for our people. This is at a cost of £2,600 each week.

All of this love and selfless devotion comes at a cost. There are no overheads of the volunteers, but money is required for food, clothing and other provisions. In time, the government will provide more, but at this still early stage, there is an invaluable service which is being provided to support daily living and provide at least informally some assistance in alleviating trauma.

Can I finally return to the Sidrah about the greatness of Avraham and his household, that Avraham commands them:

And Abraham will become a great and powerful nation, and all the nations of the world will be blessed in him.

יְחֻאֲבְרָהֶם הָיָה יְהוָה לְגוֹי גָדוֹל וְעָצוּם
וְנִבְרָכוּ-בּוֹ כָּל-גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ:

For I have known him because he commands his sons and his household after him, **that they should keep the way of the Lord to perform righteousness and justice**, in order that the Lord bring upon Abraham that which He spoke concerning him."

יִטְכִּי יִדְעֵתִיו לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֶה אֶת-בְּנָיו
וְאֶת-בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו וְשָׁמְרוּ דֶרֶךְ יְהוָה
לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט לְמַעַן הִבִּיא
יְהוָה עַל-אֲבְרָהָם אֵת אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר
עָלָיו:

We are connected as a people with something so enormous that it is difficult to see how we can make an impression. There are many worthy charities who do enormously important work. But this donation has a difference. It is about ongoing work made possible by volunteers with whom we have a connection. They are doing tzedakah and Mishpat Tangibly they make a real difference, and we have the opportunity through our connection with them to be involved in their Tzedakah and to facilitate and support it, as I hope you will do.