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## **Dig Deeper**

SKYPE interviews with commentator and respondents on www.shma.com

Tn a world that increasingly values virtual connec-Itions, we collect friends online like baseball cards and offer carefully crafted and often witty status updates in lieu of conversation. Yet many of us feel

more alone than ever before; despite the number of Internet friends we may confirm, we still crave face-to-face interaction with others.

To foster that personal interaction, we must take some initiative - with some risk. We must leave the safety of our glowing screens to open the doors of our homes, revealing our sometimes shoddy furniture, our less-than-sparkling kitchens, our well-intentioned but mediocre cooking. We must endure the awkward pauses and bumps that are natural to human discourse and appreciate that real conversation requires more than 140 characters.

When we do this, revealing the vulnerable, imperfect person behind the polished online persona, we recall the very reason for atonement: None of us is perfect; all of us are flawed. This realization possible only through interfacing with others comforts and reminds us of our shared human yearning to grow, stretch, and ever improve...together.

-Lauren Kurland

 $H^{
m ospitality}$  is indeed a practice that can bring about transformation. Many of us cherish connections to community and spirituality that were forged around the dinner table.

And yet, the social dynamic of the table of hospitality may perpetuate the hierarchical dynamic of

the altar. At the altar, one's spiritual goals could only be accomplished through the offices of the priests and Levites. The Jewish dinner table, especially the "Shabbes invitation," has the potential to accentuate disparities between hosts and guests. Can we eat as easily at one table as another? From whose kitchen may we place food on the table? Would we accept an invitation to eat at our guest's table?

There is one key difference between the dynamics of altar and table. In the Temple, the "guests"

needed the priests in order to accomplish atonement. But Rashi, in his comments on Chagigah, suggests that the table has taken the place of the altar; he reverses the roles. Now it is the hosts who

Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish explain: At the time when the Temple stood, the altar used to make atonement for a person; now a person's table makes atonement for him. (Talmud Bavli, Chagigah 27a) "A person's table makes atonement for him..." by means of welcoming guests to one's table, "hachnasat orchim."

-Rashi on Chagigah 27a

hat once was true has been transformed: a Temple, an altar, a ritual of sacrifice officiated by priests on behalf the people; no longer are they bound to that ancient time and place. R. Yohanan and Resh Lakish propel us forward, revealing an invisible line of connection between past and present. Now, we sit in our private homes at our kitchen or dining room tables made of polished wood or glass. Our table is laden with food, not sacrifice. We talk of politics, work, school, sports teams, and HDTV - seemingly profane topics, yet somehow, they allow for atonement.

How? Rashi suggests it is the practice of welcoming guests - creating space at our table. It is a willingness to share a meal and a conversation, to seek out shared interests, to test out perceived differences. It is to make visible the lines of connection that bind us together.

What is atonement? More than just settling the sin scoreboard, atonement was and is a process of transformation. Priests offered sacrifices as a tool by which we would understand and experience our connection to God and to one another. Today, we are invited to the table as individuals, but, if we are generous with our food and fellowship, we may leave transformed – more connected, less alone – and those connections may be enough to transform ourselves, our families, our communities, and, ultimately, our world.

-Dara Frimmer

achieve atonement for themselves by virtue of the invited guests. Rabbi Yochanan was one who was born into the tradition and who brought Resh Lakish into it. We fulfill their combined vision by recognizing that both host and guest bring something essential to the table.

-Joshua Heller

Curely, we are far re-Omoved from the Temple and its ritual practices. Yet the food on our tables, shared with family, friends, and guests, is more than an echo of the ancient cult.

And on the table you shall set the bread of display, to be before Me always. (Exodus 25:30) The Hebrew term for these loaves, lechem panim, suggests a concrete expression of the mutual longing for closeness between God and Israel. As the most perishable of ceremonial objects in the Tabernacle and later the Temple, twelve new breads replaced the old loaves each Shabbat, thereby renewing the loving bond.

So it remains. Challah making is a labor-intensive process repeated weekly. Raising whole, freshly baked loaves at our tables and reciting the blessing: "...ha-motzi lechem min haaretz," we affirm the love that has sustained Israel throughout the generations.

This ritual and the meal that follows also atone for our shortcom-

ings in relations with people. When travelers and others who rely on hospitality for sustenance and connection join us at the table, it is as our sages taught regarding pilgrims who came to the Temple: They used to lift [the table], show the lechem panim and say to them: "Behold the love in which you are held by the Omnipresent...." (Chagigah 26b) Thus affirming another's worthiness of divine love, we increase our own.

-Rebecca Joseph