

# Hospitality and the Threshold Covenant

Excerpt from the book *Watching and Waiting* (chapter 4), by Christie Eisner

I feel prompted by the Holy Spirit to write something about hospitality. During *Sukkot* it is considered a blessing from God if He sends guests to your *succah*. In fact, a very good movie to watch that demonstrates this is an Israeli movie called, *Ushpasim*, meaning, "guests." Unless you are fluent in Hebrew you will have to read subtitles but it is a great movie with a lot of heart and it will reinforce the Jewish mindset that when guests are sent to your home, or in this case, your *succah*, it is a sign of God's favor upon your life. Hospitality in your *succah* is encouraged and contributes to the joy and rejoicing that are commanded at this holiday; but hospitality has always been a vital part of Jewish life, as well as ancient nomadic life in general. In Roland Devaux's book, *Ancient Israel: Social Institutions*, volume 2 (p.10), he says,

Hospitality, we have said, is a necessity of life in the desert, but among the nomads this necessity has become a virtue, and a most highly esteemed one. The guest is sacred... The stranger can avail himself of this hospitality for three days, and even after leaving he has a right to protection for a given time. Some tribes extend their protection "until the salt he has eaten has left his stomach"... or for other tribes it is for three more days and within a radius of 100 miles.

Jamie Buckingham experienced this hospitality in the Sinai desert firsthand and wrote about it in his book, *A Way Through the Wilderness*, p. 27, He says:

This unwritten code of hospitality is still practiced in the Sinai. It is a code that originated with Abraham, whom Jew and Muslim both call "Father of Hospitality." It was Abraham who first decreed that the essentials of life were never denied any wilderness pilgrim, be he friend or enemy.

To host friend or enemy is seen as a gift from God to the one able to provide hospitality and refuge from harsh desert elements as well as protection from pursuing foes. Seeing strangers approaching their tent from afar causes great excitement of impending blessing about to be bestowed from above and sends desert dwellers rushing to fetch water to wash their feet and serve them food and drink. Even though poor, they will gladly slaughter their last animal to provide for their honored guests. Jamie Buckingham tells a story of a Bedouin sheik that offered protection for a fugitive. When his pursuers demanded the sheik give him up, the sheik fired a shot that killed his prized mare. The man standing next to him said, "Be careful, he has just killed what is most dear to his heart. He has nothing more to lose." (p.31) The soldiers fled and left his protected guest alone. Even if you are his enemy, he will allow you food and protection in his tent up to three days. He will sleep with his hand on his dagger in case you betray him, but the law of hospitality shows no partiality and has been ingrained in middle-eastern culture for thousands of years.

## Hospitality and the Threshold Covenant

This explains Abraham's excitement in seeing three strangers approaching his tent. He saw it as a blessing sent from God. not only in being able to host those He sent, but Abraham knew that the law of hospitality included that the only responsibility of the guests was to pronounce a blessing over the household that showed them kindness. Before the three guests left, they left a prophetic word that at the same time next year, Abraham and Sarah would have a son.

We see the importance of welcoming guests and protecting them many places throughout the Bible. Hebrews 13:2 says, "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels."

We also see the importance of protecting guests, even to extreme measures, through the story of Lot in Genesis 19. When the vile men of Sodom and Gomorrah saw two men (who were angels) enter Lot's house, and they were demanding Lot release them so they could sexually abuse them, Lot offered his daughters in exchange for the men! This is so offensive to our western understanding. Why would strangers be honored and valued above a man's virgin daughters or a young concubine not be protected by her master? The answer lies in the last phrase of the verse. Let's read it and I will explain. Genesis 19:8 says,

See now, I have two daughters who have not known a man; please, let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them as you wish; only do nothing to these men, since this is the reason they have come under the shadow of my roof.

While this phrase, "come under the shadow of my roof," is unfamiliar to us, it is a vital key to understand biblical hospitality.

There is a similar story in Judges 19 where a man sacrifices his concubine to be sexually ravaged to death by the evil men in order to protect his guest. This story illustrates the extreme value of ancient, eastern hospitality and the protection of guests that entered into their homes. The chapter tells the story of a Levite man who sought hospitality in Gibeah for himself and his concubine. An older man, seeing his vulnerability to the evils of the city, takes him into his home for the night. When evil men of the city heard that the man had taken in a guest, they tried to storm the door down to sexually abuse his visitor. The concubine was offered instead because the host had taken the man into his house and he was to be protected at all costs. The concubine died after being sacrificed to the perverse actions of the mob, but in the morning she is found with her hand reaching for the threshold of the house where her master was protected. This is very significant in light of what is known in ancient and present-day middle-eastern cultures as the threshold covenant. The concubine understood what I am about to share with you, that on that threshold an animal had been sacrificed and its blood was poured out in a basin (*saf*) buried beneath it. When the old man had invited them to be his guests, he was taking him "under the shadow of his roof." An animal or bird would have been sacrificed on the threshold and prepared for the meal. Once the man stepped over (passed-over) the threshold where the blood was caught in the basin or *saf*,

## Hospitality and the Threshold Covenant

a covenant was activated and now the host of the house was pledging his life, his honor and the name and honor of YHWH, his God, to protect and provide for his every need. The young woman, who was close to death, knew that if she could just reach that threshold and cross over it, she would be safe, not only under the shelter of the host but also under the shadow of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Whose name dwelt there. To come under the shadow of a man's roof meant guaranteed safety, provision, and protection. The host's honor and the honor of the God he served demanded it by the blood covenant made at the threshold of his dwelling.

In the first book, I wrote a chapter on Passover. When I taught on the second cup of redemption, I shared the Exodus 12 pattern the children of Israel had to follow in order to get out of Egypt. They had to kill a lamb at twilight on Aviv 14 and put its blood on the threshold of their houses. However, when you understand the details of a threshold covenant known to middle-eastern, Semitic culture of their time, you realize God was not asking them to do something totally unfamiliar. The doorway to middle-eastern dwellings had a basin or *saf* that was a hole dug out under the threshold of the entryway. When expected or unexpected guests came to visit, an animal was killed at the doorway and the blood dripped into this basin. This was more than a kind gesture of hospitality, equivalent to us today preparing a special meal for company. When guests crossed the threshold into your dwelling, they would make sure not to step on the doorway where the blood was shed but to step over it. The blood was a sign of a covenant made in the name of God (for Israelites), or the name of pagan deities, providing the covering of protection over the household. To cross over or pass-over the threshold was an act of accepting and honoring the God Whose name dwelt there. In His book, *The Threshold Covenant*, Clay Trumbell says the sacredness of this traditional welcome of a guest into a home was understood by the Israelites leaving Egypt long before God initiated the instructions for the Passover beginning in Exodus 12:2. Trumbell says this (pp.185,186):

Long before that day (of leaving Egypt) a covenant welcome was given to a guest who was to become as one of the family, or to a bride or bridegroom in marriage, by the outpouring of blood on the threshold of the door, and by staining the doorway itself with the blood of the covenant. And now Jehovah announced that He was to visit Egypt on a designated night, and that those who would welcome Him should prepare a threshold covenant, or a pass-over sacrifice, as a proof of that welcome, for where no such welcome was made ready for Him by a family, He must count the household as His enemy. In announcing this desire for a welcoming sacrifice by the Hebrews, God spoke of it as "Jehovah's pass-over," as if the pass-over rite was a familiar one, which was now to be observed as a welcome to Jehovah.

It is also interesting to note that in Hebrew, the word *pesach* or, Passover, is likened to the picture portrayed in Psalm 91, that when God sees the blood on the threshold and the doorposts, He will spread His protective wing over them, covering them and hiding them from view of the enemy. In

## Hospitality and the Threshold Covenant

light of what we just saw about the Hebrew understanding of the phrase, “dwelling under the shadow” of a person’s dwelling, this reference in Psalm 91 will have a new context.

He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High  
Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.  
I will say of the Lord, “He is my refuge and my fortress;  
My God, in Him I will trust.”  
Surely He shall deliver you from the snare of the fowler  
And from the perilous pestilence.  
He shall cover you with His feathers,  
And under His wings you shall take refuge;  
His truth shall be your shield and buckler.  
You shall not be afraid of the terror by night,  
Nor of the arrow that flies by day,  
Nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness,  
Nor of the destruction that lays waste at noonday.  
A thousand may fall at your side,  
And ten thousand at your right hand;  
But it shall not come near you.  
Only with your eyes shall you look,  
And see the reward of the wicked.  
Because you have made the Lord, who is my refuge,  
Even the Most High, your dwelling place,  
No evil shall befall you,  
Nor shall any plague come near your dwelling;  
For He shall give His angels charge over you,  
To keep you in all your ways.  
In their hands they shall bear you up,  
Lest you dash your foot against a stone.  
You shall tread upon the lion and the cobra,  
The young lion and the serpent you shall trample underfoot.  
“Because he has set his love upon Me, therefore I will deliver him;  
I will set him on high, because he has known My name.  
He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him;  
I will be with him in trouble;  
I will deliver him and honor him.  
With long life I will satisfy him,  
And show him My salvation.”

## Hospitality and the Threshold Covenant

To “abide under the shadow” is referring to being under the protection of someone where blood has been shed and a covenant has been made. It is interesting to note here that, as stated in Clay Trumbell’s quote earlier, he mentioned in ancient eastern cultures, when blood was shed on the threshold of the groom’s home and, when his bride steps over the threshold of blood into his dwelling, a covenant is sealed and they are legally married. This explains the strange wedding ceremony of Isaac and Rebekah in Genesis 24:67.

Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent; and he took Rebekah and she became his wife, and he loved her.

Remember what we talked about in previous chapters and in my first book on the spring feasts concerning an ancient Jewish ceremony? First came the betrothal and then later the consummation. Rebekah was betrothed to Isaac at her parent’s house with Abraham’s servant standing in for the groom-to-be. A bride-price or mohar was paid to her parents and lavish gifts were given to the bride, Rebekah, as a promise of the consummation to come. When the long camel ride to Isaac’s house was complete, Isaac took her hand, led her over the threshold where blood was shed and she became his wife. The tradition of carrying a bride over the threshold on her wedding night comes from this ancient tradition. Also, slaves living on southern plantations in America would put a broom down on the ground and when the bride “jumped the broom,” she was jumping over a threshold and a covenant of marriage was sealed.

In Psalm 91 we also see the phrase, “Under His wings you shall take refuge.” The Hebrew word for “wings” in this verse is *kanap*, meaning, the corners of the hem of a garment. Let’s read another verse that uses the same word. Speaking of the future coming Messiah, Malachi 4:2 says:

But to you who fear My name  
The Sun of Righteousness shall arise  
With healing in His wings.

Again, the word “wings” here is the same word meaning corners of the hem of a garment. The corners of a Jewish prayer shawl has tassels or *zsizit* according to God’s command to them in Numbers 15:38. This gives fuller meaning to the woman with the issue of blood in the New Testament. Read Luke 8:43-44:

Now a woman, having a flow of blood for twelve years, who had spent all her livelihood on physicians and could not be healed by any, came from behind and touched the border of His garment. And immediately her flow of blood stopped.

This woman believed the scripture in Malachi 4:2 that said that touching the “wings,” or the corners of the Messiah’s prayer shawl would bring healing to her body. By this act of faith, she was proclaiming she believed Jesus was in fact the Messiah and that God’s Word was true.

## Hospitality and the Threshold Covenant

This leads us to one more verse in Ruth 3:8-9. This is the main one I wanted you to see because this “rabbit trail” teaching is leading to yet another beautiful picture of a wedding! In the story of Ruth and Boaz we see this same intimate imagery of protective wings being used:

Now it happened at midnight that the man was startled, and turned himself; and there, a woman was lying at his feet. And he said, “Who are you?” So she answered, “I am Ruth, your maidservant. Take your maidservant under your wing, for you are a close relative.

Here is why this verse is so significant, and another example of the richness and depth that we miss as Gentiles if we do not understand Jewish customs and traditions found throughout the Word. When a Jewish man prays and wraps himself or “hides” in his prayer shawl, he is entering into the Psalm 91 imagery of being in a secret place, abiding “under the shadow of the Almighty.” Often over the course of Jewish history, a prayer shawl was tied to four poles and used as a wedding canopy or *chuppah* that a man and woman would be married under. A *chuppah* represents a man’s household that he is bringing his bride into. When Ruth asked to be covered under the “wings” of the prayer shawl of Boaz, she was asking him to fulfill the law of kinsman redeemer and take her into his household to be his bride. In case you need one more verse to prove that “wings” and weddings really do go together, Ezekiel 16:8 will convince you. This is a heartbreaking portion of scripture when God’s heart is broken over His Bride, Israel, being unfaithful and He is speaking to her reminding her of His nurturing, tender love.

“When I passed by you again and looked upon you, indeed your time was the time of love; so I spread My wing over you and covered your nakedness. Yes, I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine,” says the Lord God.

Besides the covenant of marriage, crossing over thresholds where an animal’s blood has been shed and a nice meal is prepared is also a serious pledge, to not only welcome guests, but to care for them as close family. In Clay Trumbull’s book, *The Threshold Covenant*, he explains this ancient custom of greeting guests with a “blood welcome” at the door. Trumbull says (p. 3),

The primitive altar of the family would seem to have been the threshold, or door-sill, or entrance-way, of the home dwelling place. It is obvious by surviving customs, that houses preceded temples, and that the father of the household was the earliest priest. Sacrifices for the family were, therefore, within or at the entrance to the family domicile.

He goes on to describe the covenant made by that sacrifice with arriving guests (p. 4):

When a guest who is worthy of special honor is to be welcomed to a home, the blood of a slaughtered, or a “sacrificed,” animal is shed on the threshold of that home, as a means of adopting the new-comer into the family, or of making a covenant union with him... Then the guest steps over the blood, across the threshold; and in this act he becomes, as it were, a member of the family by the Threshold Covenant.

## Hospitality and the Threshold Covenant

If a host is of humble means, his sacrifice might be a pair of pigeons. A wealthier man might offer a bullock, a lamb or a goat but one thing about the offering was consistent: The more costly the gift, according to the means of the host, the greater the honor being bestowed on the welcomed guest. Two important things come to mind. In Exodus 12 the children of Israel are told to slaughter a lamb (according to the custom of the day it would be killed on the threshold of their dwelling), and put the blood on the doorposts. In this case, it was the Lord Himself who would be the coming honored Guest and the blood on the doorway and threshold declared their covenant with Him, that His eternal name dwelt there and that He was worshipped in that home.

In the ancient middle-eastern culture a thief or a trespasser would not dare to come through the door of a house to rob it because it would be invoking the wrath of the God who dwells there. Instead, the thief would dig through the wall or climb through a window. Jesus refers to this in John 10:1-4 when He says,

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.

I am going to add a few more important thoughts here about thresholds and covenant because, while they mean little to us as 21st century, western Christians, understanding their intensity from God's standpoint is vital to understanding His passionate heart that is jealous for His Bride. The Passover story in the book of Exodus is remembered each year to Jews even today as the time God came to Egypt and took them out to be His Bride. The Song of Solomon is still read during the week of Passover to remember the time of courtship between God and the Jewish people. It was initiated by the lamb's blood killed on the threshold of their houses and applied to the doorposts as a sign of welcome and covenant being made with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Their patriarch, Abraham, entered into covenant with the LORD in a strange and seemingly barbaric way to our modern viewpoint. In ancient Israel a covenant would be made by slaughtering an animal, cutting up the pieces and lining the pieces up in opposite rows. Then the two who were entering into covenant would walk through the middle of the rows of dead animals. By doing this they were saying, "If one of us breaks this covenant, may we be like these animals that we killed." In light of this, let's read Genesis 15:9-22, where God is making a covenant with Abraham and promising him that he will become a great nation and that this nation will inherit the Promised Land that God was giving to him.

So He said to him, "Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other... Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness

## Hospitality and the Threshold Covenant

fell upon him. Then He said to Abram: “Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces. On the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying:

“To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates—the Kenites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”

In light of this, go back to the story in Judges 19 that I mentioned above about the Levite whose concubine was abused all night long by Benjamites from Gibeah. The seriousness of this lewd and defiling act was made even worse because it was perpetrated by brothers who were in covenant with God and with each other. The Levite’s response, which seems totally barbaric to us, sent a chilling warning to his Benjamite brothers. The covenant that was cut between them by their father Abraham, the pieces of slaughtered animals that testified of that covenant, the pieces that the LORD Himself walked through to seal forever, this was the covenant that was broken. By cutting up his concubine’s body and spreading her body parts through the land of Gibeah, though a totally horrific visual aid, he was sending a vivid picture of broken covenant: “If this covenant is broken, then may it be done to you.” This demonstrative act was legitimizing his declaration of war against Benjamin and what would soon be done to the people in his tribe. This will help you to understand an end-time portion of Scripture about the future of the nations that will one day come against Jerusalem. Let’s read Zechariah 12:2-3.

Behold, I will make Jerusalem a cup of drunkenness to all the surrounding peoples, when they lay siege against Judah and Jerusalem. And it shall happen in that day that I will make Jerusalem a very heavy stone for all peoples; all who would heave it away will surely be cut in pieces, though all nations of the earth are gathered against it.

When I looked up the word “cup” in this verse, I was surprised to find that it was the same Hebrew word, *saf*, or threshold! This portion of scripture is a teaching in itself but I will just briefly call your attention to it for the sake of you seeing the importance of this idea of a threshold covenant. God’s house is Jerusalem, the holy city where He chose for His name to dwell and where His throne will one day be seated on earth. Those who dare cross His threshold with evil intent, into this city where His Son’s blood was shed for all mankind, will be “cut to pieces.” It is a threshold that ought not be stepped on or trampled over by wicked men coming to destroy it. One day in the prophetic future



## Hospitality and the Threshold Covenant

of Israel, all nations will come against Jerusalem, but when they pass-over that threshold where His blood was shed, woe to His enemies! This scripture from Hebrews 10:29-31 comes to mind:

Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. And again, "The Lord will judge His people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

If you enter the home of most Jewish families, you will notice what is called a *mezuzah* attached to the frame of their doors with outside access. Rolled up inside of it is a handwritten, parchment scroll with the scriptures from Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21 written in Hebrew. It is called the Shema prayer and it is one of the main prayers recited by practicing Jews around the world. On one of its sides the name of God is written to send the message that anyone crossing the threshold of this home is entering a dwelling that "abides under the shelter of the Almighty" (Psalm 91:1).

The Shema prayer appears on one side on the parchment, and one of the names of G-d, Sha-dai, appears on the reverse side. The name is an acronym for the Hebrew words which mean, "Guardian of the doorways of Israel. ([Chabad.org](http://Chabad.org), "What is a *Mezuzah*")

## Practical, Personal Applications of Hospitality

The Lord gave me a heart for hospitality in my early years of marriage. A friend at church recommended a book called, *The Hidden Art of Homemaking* by Edith Schaeffer. I don't remember much about the book except that the author imparted a desire in me to create an atmosphere in our home that would be a welcoming refuge for our family and friends. She taught me that hospitality has nothing to do with the size of your house, how clean it is or what food you serve. It has everything to do with creating an atmosphere that can make the people coming into your home feel like they are special and very welcomed guests. Edith Schaeffer gave a few simple tips on making our house feel like a home that stuck with me 40 years later. A few fresh cut flowers in a vase on your dining room table and cloth napkins can send the message to all who gather there that someone cared for their hearts as well as their stomachs. But on a deeper level, as God began to share His heart with me about hospitality from a biblical and a culturally Jewish perspective, my desire to practice it grew stronger.

I already shared the importance of thresholds or doorways to a household. Crossing over them spoke of covenant with all who entered. But also, a Jewish home was considered a small sanctuary. Tali Loewenthal, in her article called, "The Temple at Home" ([Chabad.org](http://Chabad.org)) says,

The ideal Jewish home is called "a small sanctuary." It has the quality of the Temple, a dwelling for G-d... In the command to build the Sanctuary, G-d tells Moses "They shall

## Hospitality and the Threshold Covenant

make for Me a Sanctuary, and I will dwell in them." (Exodus 25:8) ... Thus, the Jewish home is indeed "a small Sanctuary." Like the Temple, it is a center for Torah, prayer and kindness. There, in the home as in the Temple, the Divine Presence dwells.

As I researched this idea further, I learned that the dining room table is considered an “altar” where family and guests are nourished with food and fellowship around the Lord. The table is the place of weekly Shabbats and festival meals, the place of uplifting conversations and edification, a sense of belonging to each other, a place that has been prepared for God’s presence to come. Combined with my early desire to create a home that is a safe refuge for family and friends, seeing the importance of hosting meals around our table made John and I aware of its importance before God. We always try to pray for the people coming to our house beforehand. We ask Him to make us sensitive to their needs or anything they might be going through. We ask for words of encouragement that He might have for them or to make us aware if they need prayer. All who enter our house are His Bride or His potential Bride and it is our honor to prepare a place for the Bridegroom to touch their hearts. We are His Bride also, but when we are hosting, we are the friends of the Bridegroom caring for those He loves. Life is a battle and everyone needs a refuge and a place to be cared for. Like the middle-eastern Bedouins we can offer our best and send guests back into the “desert” refreshed. But more than that, biblical hospitality is hosting His presence, and that is the thing I love to do more than anything else in the world. During *Sukkot*, the blessing of hospitality and hosting His presence lasts for a week!