



SHABBOS INVITATIONS: INSPIRATION TO OBSERVE OR INCITEMENT TO SIN?

Achad Ha'am said that "more than the Jews have kept the Shabbos, the Shabbos has kept the Jews."¹ Indeed, very few activities have done more for bringing Jews to Judaism than the Shabbos. The experience of a Shabbos meal, and of Shabbos in general, is such a positive force in bringing people closer to Torah that it has become a central tool in outreach and Jewish education. From Jeff Seidel arranging a Shabbos meal for a backpacker in Jerusalem to NCSY Shabbatonim, the Shabbos Project and Shabbos.com, the beauty

and sanctity of Shabbos has had a major impact on countless Jews. However, it is not always a simple thing to arrange such an experience. A Shabbos guest may not necessarily live within walking distance of the host, and many people find it awkward and uncomfortable to stay over at the home of a complete stranger. What then does halacha say about inviting people even if we know that they may drive?

Rav Asher Weiss frames the question in the introduction to his responsum on the subject:

On the one hand we may not be flippant regarding the sanctity of Shabbos and act in a way that the people who we are bringing closer to the life of Torah . . . will see that, G-d forbid, we are being lax regarding the sanctity of Shabbos and ignoring its desecration. On the other hand, very frequently this is the sole opportunity to have a meaningful impact on these people. During the weekdays they are busy with work or study, and only on Shabbos are they available to be hosted. And, experience has shown, that there is no greater resource than a Shabbos table to bring

hearts closer and to influence our wayward and unconvinced brothers.²

The most obvious halachic problem is the prohibition of “placing a stumbling block before the blind” (*lifnei iver*)³ — causing another to sin,⁴ which also applies (albeit *miderabanan*) even when one is not the cause of the sin, but merely aides and abets the sin, *mesayei yedei ovrei aveirah*.⁵

On the other hand, we are confronted with the tragedy of millions of Jews who are ignorant of Torah and have never experienced a Shabbos, and for whom this may be the one opportunity to experience authentic Judaism.

The subject of Shabbos invitations is an issue that has generated much discussion in halachic literature.⁶ We will focus only on three of the major approaches in this essay. While each situation is unique and a *posek* should be consulted in each case, this article can be used as background for the question and to help understand the answer. Our discussion here is to “magnify the Torah and increase its honor” *lehagdil Torah ule-ha’adirah*,⁷ and is “*lehalachah, velo lema’aseh*.”

In probably the earliest responsa on the subject, Rav Moshe Feinstein addressed a rabbi whose congregants wished to begin an educational minyan for children on Shabbos;⁸ a woman who was asked to give a class for children, who were likely to be driven, on Shabbos afternoon;⁹ and a rabbi who inquired if it was permitted to invite people to pray at the synagogue if they lived at a distance where it was clear that they would drive.¹⁰ In each case Rav Moshe ruled that inviting someone on Shabbos when it was likely that they would drive is prohibited and a transgression

of *lifnei iver*. He also added that if they lived so far away that it was not possible to walk, then inviting them for Shabbos would also involve the prohibition of *meisis umediach*, the prohibition against proselytizing for idolatry and influencing people to transgress.¹¹ Some suggest¹² that it is possible that an invitation to a Shabbos meal where the sole intention is to bring the guest to Torah observance would have evoked a different response from Rav Moshe, “since one is sending a message that one wants the guest to ultimately keep Shabbos (and one’s intention is not to misguide the guest into doing more sins).”¹³ However, Rav Moshe’s opinion is usually understood as prohibiting invitations even for outreach. This was also the opinion of Rav Yosef Shalom Eliashiv, who states that “one does not engage in ‘business deals’ regarding Torah laws, to say that it is worth it to transgress *lifnei iver* so that we can bring him to keep Shabbos.”¹⁴

Later discussion of the question raised the possibility of leniency by viewing the cases as not necessarily a binary choice between causing a transgression and not causing a transgression. Rather, *lifnei iver* situations may be nuanced and complex, where the choice is between two transgressions, one minor and one major. There may be cases where whatever we do there will be a negative outcome or transgression, in which case we should choose the lesser of two evils.¹⁵ If we intend to remove a sin we are not in transgression of *lifnei iver*. Some examples should illustrate this idea.

Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, in a responsum regarding giving food and drink to a guest who will not make a

blessing before eating, states:

*Since the prohibition of giving food to someone who will not make a bracha is solely due to the stumbling block that is being created, and if one refrains from serving him food one will create a greater “stumbling block” — he will be distanced from Torah and fear of Hashem, and may hate and be angry at those who walk in the path of the Torah — therefore, there is no sin whatsoever, as there is no lifnei iver; on the contrary, he is saving him from a greater “stumbling block” by actively substituting it for a smaller “stumbling block.”*¹⁶

A similar idea is mentioned by Rav Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz, the Chazon Ish, regarding the leniency of giving food that may have been produced in the *Shmittah* year in a prohibited fashion to a poor person:

*It appears that the reason the Sages were lenient in a doubt (safeik meshumar), even though placing a possible “lifnei iver” is certainly prohibited, and it would have been appropriate to be stringent in a case of uncertainty; because if we would be stringent in all doubts we would also cause a “lifnei iver.” For we would avoid kindness and preclude the paths of life and peace from ourselves and from them; they are merely ignorant [not evil] and we are obligated to sustain them and to be benevolent towards them. And how much more so, not to increase hatred and rivalry between us and them, and they would transgress “Do not hate your brother” and numerous other prohibitions that are no less severe than the prohibition from which we wish to save them.*¹⁷

Neither of the above responsa discuss inviting someone on Shabbos, but I believe we can find a similar idea in a responsum by Rav Moshe Shternbuch. A couple in Johannesburg who were *baalei teshuvah* wanted to

invite their non-religious parents for a Shabbos meal. They felt that experiencing a beautiful Shabbos with children and grandchildren would have a very positive effect on their parents' Judaism and bring them toward observance of mitzvos. In fact, they had hosted their parents a number of times and they seemed to be making progress in their attitude to Torah observance. The couple offered their parents accommodations, although they knew that the parents would want to stay in their own house and were fairly certain that the parents would drive. Rav Moshe Shternbuch (Av Beis Din of the Badatz in Jerusalem) responded:

It appears that the prohibition of "lifnei iver" is similar to the literal understanding of tripping a blind person. If the intention of the one who causes the tripping is to benefit the other, then he is not causing a "stumbling block." Just like a surgeon is not considered as though he has injured the other; so too here, his intention is not to cause a sin . . . rather he hopes to guide them and bring them to truth. Therefore there is no prohibition of lifnei iver, and since he is not instructing them to drive, and on the contrary, he has expressed to them his pain regarding their driving . . .¹⁸ it appears there is no prohibition of lifnei iver since his intention is solely for their good. However, there is a desecration of Hashem's name if they drive directly to his house publicly on Shabbos and so they should park in a place where it is not obvious that they are driving to his house. He should try as much as possible to prevent them from transgressing

Shabbos, but if this is not possible, and he feels that inviting them would have a positive effect on their return to Judaism, he should not refrain from this because of the prohibition of lifnei iver rather he should draw them close as much as possible. "The left should push away and the right hand should draw close"¹⁹ and he should continue to exhort and instruct them regarding the severity of transgressing Shabbos and the sweetness of its observance, and with the help of Hashem he will turn them to the better path, and there is no greater honor of parents than this.²⁰

Perhaps we can suggest that underlying Rav Shternbuch's leniency is a non-binary view of lifnei iver. Not inviting the guests at all will not necessarily prevent transgressions. On the contrary, they will remain far from Torah observance, and engage in further transgression of Shabbos. Inviting them for Shabbos is not lifnei iver; we are not "placing a stumbling block before the blind" by inviting them, rather we are removing a larger stumbling block and replacing it with a smaller one. Rav Shternbuch is saying that if our intention is to remove a stumbling block then we are not transgressing lifnei iver at all. As Rav Auerbach stated, "Placing the smaller stumbling block is not an act of tripping, but an act of saving."²¹ We can add to this the observation that the guest will be sinning less at the host's home on Shabbos than he would be if he did not come. This was noted by Rav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg, who asked me, "What will your guest be doing otherwise if

he does not come for Shabbos? Will he not be driving, using electricity, eating non-kosher food? While he is at your house, at least he will be eating kosher and keeping Shabbos."²² This idea is used by Rav Asher Weiss as an additional reason to be lenient.²³

Rav Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg using the same logic, writes: *It appears that when the one who causes the stumbling intends to do a mitzvah, there is no lifnei iver. And regarding the very essence of the law of lifnei iver, if not for my awe of our great, recent rabbinic authorities, I would say, that any situation in which the one who causes the "stumbling block" has intention to do a mitzvah, then there is no prohibition of lifnei iver...²⁴*

Rav Weinberg considered this to be a general leniency in similar halachic dilemmas:

And from all of the above, an answer can be found for a number of questions that are relevant to lifnei iver, for example, if it is permitted to officiate at the wedding of a couple who are not careful about family purity laws, or if it is permitted to be a match-maker for couples who are not careful about Torah law in general.²⁵

A third approach is offered by Rav Asher Weiss. He rules that: *There is room to be lenient ... and the appropriate way to behave is the following: First one should insist that the guests stay for the whole of Shabbos and to arrange a place for them to sleep. One should express to them our pain if they only decide to attend the meals and transgress Shabbos. However, if despite this they decide to transgress Shabbos*



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and come anyway, one should draw them close and not prevent them from participating in the meals. Even if the invitation is not personal, but is a public invitation to the community, one should advertise that there is a possibility to stay over, and one may ignore the fact that they may choose to come by desecrating Shabbos, G-d forbid.

His ruling is based primarily on the idea that when one is not the cause of the sin, but merely aiding (*mesayei*), this is a rabbinic prohibition according to some, and according to others permitted. He cites the Ramah who rules leniently but says that a pious person should be stringent.²⁶ In our case, Rav Weiss writes *It appears clear and obvious to me that if his entire intention is to draw them close with cables of love and to bring them under the wings of the Divine Presence, his stringency will be a leniency. A pious person should be stringent in saving souls, to try with all his power to return the hearts of the children to their Father, and then one is not aiding in a sin, but performing a great mitzvah.*²⁷

My revered teacher, Rav Moshe Shapiro zatzal, also maintained that we should offer the guest accommodations for all of Shabbos, but should welcome them anyway should they choose not to accept the accommodations and to drive. Rav Dovid Cohen suggested that we should say something to the effect of, “Come for Shabbos, I can accommodate you for sleeping and meals.” If the guest says “I can’t come for the whole Shabbos,” then you can reply, “You are always welcome.”²⁸ [As I stated earlier, a competent halachic

authority should be consulted, especially regarding something as severe as chillul Shabbos.]

Chanukah is a time when we celebrate our miraculous victory over the Hellenists. The Hellenist Seleucids wanted to absorb the Jews culturally and turn Israel into a Greek vassal state. The Hellenists were successful in their campaign against Judaism. Many Jews were quite content to become Hellenists and adopted paganism and a Greek lifestyle. To these Jewish Hellenists, the Greeks represented all that was modern and new, while Judaism was antiquated and out of fashion. There are millions of Jews who know almost nothing about their heritage. They are not like the ancient Jewish Hellenists who were ideologically committed to assimilation; rather, they are merely ignorant. Often, the embrace of kindness, and the warmth of Shabbos can be enough to spark their interest. Today, to be a Maccabee does not require taking up arms; it requires reaching out with both arms. Those of us who observe the Shabbos have a responsibility to share this beautiful gift with our brothers and sisters. In my experience, and in the experience of many others, by sharing Shabbos, we too can rekindle the flame of Torah in the Jewish soul.

Endnotes

1. *Shabbat VeTzioniyut, Hashiloach*, Vol. 3:6, Sivan 5658.
2. *Responsa Minchas Asher* 2:28.
3. Vayikra 19: 14.
4. *Avodah Zarah* 6b.

5. Tosfos, *Shabbos* 3a “*Bava dereishah*” — although this a matter of argument among the Rishonim as cited below by Rav Asher Weiss.
6. For the most comprehensive treatment on this issue that I have seen, refer to the article by Rabbi Avraham Edelstein, Olami Resources, The Laws of Outreach: Invitation for Shabbos, <http://nleresources.com/2019/08/new-from-the-laws-of-outreach-invitations-for-shabbos>.
7. *Yeshaya* 42:21.
8. *Igros Moshe, Orach Chaim* 1:98.
9. *Ibid.*, 4:71.
10. *Ibid.*, 1:99.
11. *Devarim* 13:6. *Igros Moshe, O”C* 1:99.
12. Cited by Rav Edelstein, based on a shiur by Rav Chaim Mintz.
13. From the article quoted above, p. 213.
14. *Chashukei Chemed on Sanhedrin* 21a.
15. *Kiddushin* 21b-22a.
16. *Minchas Shlomo* 1:35 (1).
17. *Chazon Ish, Shvi’is* 12:9.
18. “and there is no obligation of responsibility (*arvus*) to prevent them from sin, as they are public transgressors of Shabbos, as per *Shach* and *Dagul Mervavah, Yoreh Deah* 151.”
19. *Sotah* 47a.
20. *Teshuvos VeHanhagos, Orach Chaim* 1:358.
21. *Minchas Shlomo* 1:35 (1).
22. Rosh Yeshiva of Torah Ohr, Yerushalayim, in a conversation with the author of this article.
23. *Minchas Asher* 2:28:4.
24. *Teshuvos Seridei Aish*, Vol. 2, 57 (7).
25. *Ibid.* 57 (8).
26. Ramah, *Yoreh Deah* 151:1.
27. *Responsa Minchas Asher* 2:28 (also 2:29).
28. I heard this from Rav Cohen at an AJOP conference and in conversation with him. See Edelstein, p. 222.