

In the past couple of months, we introduced our theme of hachnasat hager/welcoming the stranger for the year. As we continue to come up with ideas of how to concretely manifest that theme, I've been thinking of a story which illustrates the attitude that I'd like to cultivate as I work towards becoming more welcoming.

I'll set this version at a yeshiva, a Jewish boarding school. The yeshiva was in decline. Enrollment had dropped. The students and teachers were demoralized and impatient with each other.

One day, the Rosh Yeshiva, the head rabbi, returned after a contemplative walk in the woods and gathered the whole yeshiva for an announcement: "I have received a message that someone who studies or will study at this yeshiva is the moshiach [messiah] – but who it is cannot yet be revealed."

The faculty, staff, and students all began speculating who among them might be moshiach. The possibilities multiplied. "Perhaps it is the nervous new teacher. . ." "What if it is the unassuming janitor who cleans at the end of each day?" "What if it is Shira, who spontaneously sings every morning?" "What if it is David, who struggles doggedly to keep up with the daily learning?" "Maybe . . . could it be me?"

Because they weren't sure, they began to treat each other as if each person was moshiach. They listened more closely and responded more respectfully. The excitement of knowing moshiach was in their midst animated their studies, and soon the yeshiva gained a reputation for the respect with which all its residents treated each other and the joy that they brought to their study. With its new reputation came more students, more possibilities, and greater energy – so that in time, it did not matter at all who was the real moshiach.

Now today, what if, like those students, we imagined that someone among us could bring about redemption? How would we treat each other? How would we welcome new people? It may be that my new maternal bliss hormones are making me overly optimistic... But what might be possible?

– RABBI RUHI SOPHIA MOTZKIN RUBENSTEIN