

“Knock, knock” (Yitro)

*Manners must adorn knowledge and smooth its way through the world. -Lord
Chesterfield*

After the miraculous escape of the Children of Israel from Egypt, Yitro, the father-in-law of Moses, sends word that he is coming to meet them at their encampment in the desert, accompanied by his daughter Tzipora, Moses' wife, and the two sons of Moses and Tzipora.

Rabbi Ovadia Sforno (1475-1549) wonders why Yitro needs to send word ahead. Yitro could have spared the expense and effort of sending a messenger through the desert to inform Moses of what was going to happen in any case. Yitro could have even surprised Moses with the welcome sight of the wife and children that he hadn't seen in some time.

Sforno explains that it is simply good manners. Sending a simple messenger ahead would give Moses sufficient time to prepare for their arrival. Moses can then organize their accommodation so there wouldn't be an embarrassing wait if they were to suddenly appear.

Sforno brings as support for such etiquette the Talmud (Tractate Pesachim 112a):

“Do not enter your house suddenly, even more so to your friend's house.”

One might think that it would be permissible or even praiseworthy to check in suddenly on the goings-on in one's house. A surprise inspection can confirm that everything is truly in order and keep people on their toes. However, Sforno reminds us that in truth, sudden appearances are rude, startling, and an invasion of privacy. If it's for inspection purposes they demonstrate a lack of trust or sensitivity.

Sforno and the Talmud don't mean to dissuade people from making casual and unplanned visits to their friends and family. They just suggest that you call first or at the very least knock on the door.

May we always have the capacity and enjoyment of welcoming friends and family to our homes.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To my father-in-law, Josef Tocker, on his 80th birthday. Mazal Tov!