It has now been a year since I started going to Shir Tikvah. I could go on and on about all the reasons why Shir Tikvah has made me feel at home, but one thing that I love about Shir Tikvah is their practice of radical hospitality.

When Caitlin and I first came to Shir Tikvah, after services we were welcomed by various members of the congregation, spiritual leader [Wendy Goldberg](), and Rabbi [Michael Adam Latz](). Caitlin and I were nervous at our first time in a new place, as most people are, but everyone at Shir Tikvah made us feel at ease. The best part about it was it didn't feel like a spiel -- it felt like a genuine introduction.

I thought, "This is radical hospitality," and I left it at that. I continued to see congregants welcome newcomers, and I became one of those congregants who approached new people to extend a hand and say, "I haven't seen you before. I'm Ariel."

For a while I was content with this being my definition of radical hospitality. To me it was radical, because I hadn't experienced such intentional, devoted welcoming of strangers before. I saw the hospitality of welcoming potential new members and non-Jewish visitors alike. There was no pretense or agenda. Hospitality was practiced because we believe in the virtue of being hospitable, and our Jewish duty to welcome the stranger.

Recently I've been thinking about the word "radical" in the phrase radical hospitality. What is the difference between hospitality and radical hospitality? Is the fact that we are welcoming the stranger (as opposed to a friend) make it radical, or should we strive to push our hospitality further? Is there a point at which we rescind our hospitality, where might that point lie, and to what end?

I got into a discussion with a friend about this very issue. We have discussed the importance of welcoming the stranger, but one key aspect of that person being a stranger is we do not know if they are friend or foe. Welcoming the stranger could be interpreted as not turning away a potential friend. But what if the person seeking our refuge is a known enemy?

Enemy is a strong word, and I am not using it to imply any risk of physical violence, but I use it to illustrate that there are people who hold beliefs and values that hurt us either as individuals or as members of a group. There are people who have the ability to deeply offend who we are and what we stand for. It can be very difficult to engage with these individuals, and I do not blame anyone who chooses to disengage for their own well-being.

But I have been thinking about what it means to be a mensch, and how I can push myself to practice Jewish values in all the ways in which I am able. At first when considering whether or not someone who offends me should receive my hospitality, my thoughts were of myself: that would make me feel uncomfortable. But then I challenged myself to think outside of myself: does this person not also deserve a safe space? Would I not wish for them to show me compassion despite our differences, and am I too good to do the same?

Sometimes avoiding offensive situations is a necessary safety precaution. Not everyone has the ability to engage, and am not one to dictate how others should live their lives. But I am thinking of myself again: if I avoid a potentially uncomfortable situation, in what way does that improve me as a person? It what way does it improve my "foe"? Has anything changed at all? Is stagnancy something I personally wish to aim for?

It is true that it is unlikely one will change their opponent's viewpoints just by being hospitable. But, like Shir Tikvah has shown me, radical hospitality isn't about an agenda. I was not welcomed so I could pay member dues, I was welcomed because it is a Jewish value. And likewise I would not welcome a foe to alter their viewpoint that I find offensive; I would do so because radical hospitality is something I personally believe in.

I think, also, we often talk about compassion as treating others how you would like to be treated, because they are also a human being, and their feelings matter. That is true. This is not to be discounted. But I think there is another side to that as well. We as humans are not selfless creatures; we were not made to be selfless. The truth of the matter is, it is not wrong to do things for yourself as well, as long as it does not negatively affect other people. I think we should reframe how we think about our mitzvot, our commandments that have been interpreted as "good deeds." Tzedakah (charity/justice), gemilut chasadim (acts of loving kindness), and yes, hachnasat orchim (radical hospitality), are all different ways we can engage in tikkun olam (repairing the world). Tikkun olam helps our community, our world, but let us not forget we are a part of that world we are helping. Good deeds feel good for a reason -- because by helping others, we are helping ourselves. By loving others, we are showing love to ourselves. It is not necessary to be selfless to engage in radical acts of love: by being compassionate to someone despite the things about them you don't like, you are enabling yourself to be compassionate to yourself despite the things about yourself you don't like.

I have not always felt this way, as those who have known me a while can attest to. But that is one aspect I cherish about being human: we all have the ability to change. Thank you Shir Tikvah for making me consider ways in which I can improve myself. Here is to another year with my beloved congregation, and another year of growth. Shabbat Shalom.