

Rabbi Rochelle Tulik
Erev Rosh Hashana 5783
Who Are the Strangers?

Love the stranger.
Love the stranger as yourself.
Love the stranger as yourself and light blinded you'll see that inner and outer
worlds are one. As You are One.

Love the stranger.

But who is the stranger? Are you? Am I?

And what makes the stranger strange?

And who gets to decide?

We are commanded to love the stranger as ourselves. But who are the
strangers?

Are you? Am I?

Who are the strangers and what makes them strange? And who gets to
decide?

Were you born here? Were you born Jewish? Are you new to town? Are you
new to the community? Is this your first time in this building? Is it your first
time back in a year?

Who are the strangers? Are you? Am I?

And what makes a stranger strange? Is it something about them? Something about us? Why is it always us and them? Who defines what is strange? Who defines who is in ... and who is out?

That's strange, you don't look Jewish. I've never seen you here before, are you new? That's strange, where I come from, we don't usually read that page...or sing that tune. Oh...I see you brought your kids. Try to keep them quiet so the regulars aren't disturbed. Some of us are here to pray.

That's strange. Most people dress up when they come to temple.

Who are the strangers and who am I to point them out? We are all strange. All strange to someone somewhere. So who am I to point it out?

Torah teaches us over and over again to welcome the stranger because we know what it feels like to be a stranger. On Sukkot we invite friends, neighbors, anyone to sit and share. On Passover, we open the door for Elijah, hoping to herald in a time of peace and love through this one act of hospitality. Time and again the Torah reminds us how important it is to deal kindly with strangers, visitors, refugees, wanderers.

The ancient teaching defines the stranger as a non-Jew living amongst Jews and lays down all the ways that they should act and all the ways that we should act towards them. Today, our tradition defines the stranger much more broadly, encouraging us to welcome ALL strangers, strangers to us here, and strangers in our larger communities. Not just known non-Jews living in our midst. All those who join us - Jews, non-Jews, friends, partners, guests. Strangers. Welcome the strangers.

It is the single most Jewish act - to help someone feel like they belong. Help welcome someone in, bring them in, share your community with them. And it is one of the hardest things to do. Because it can be scary - welcoming a

stranger is counter intuitive. Strangers, by definition, are strange to us. Different. Potentially dangerous.

Our Torah teaches us to embrace the stranger - but our parents taught us to be wary of the stranger. Tradition invites us to open our doors and our hearts. Society reminds us to lock our doors, close our gates; cautions us of the dangers that lurk in the unknown. It is easy to make snap judgements, assume the worst. We have to find ways to suspend judgment, open our minds to the potential good there can be in what is strange. We have to find the balance between sticking to what is safe and opening ourselves up to something that might be scary but might also be beautiful. A new voice, a new perspective, a new melody, a new friend. We have to find ways to keep our hearts open to things that are different - people, styles, traditions. Welcoming the stranger opens us to a world of possibilities.

Which is what Rosh Hashana is all about. Looking back on the past year, looking out on the new year and seeing a world of possibilities. Opening ourselves to the potential for change, for improvement, for acceptance. Opening ourselves up to the strangers and the strange.

Who are the strangers and what makes them strange?

You are a stranger but not here. But sometimes here. But only if you think you are. Because as far as I'm concerned everyone who walks through those doors with the intent to join in community, pray with intention, celebrate a loved one, mourn a loss. Everyone who walks through those doors belongs. And is no stranger to this community. But I can't tell you you aren't a stranger. Because you might feel strange. You might feel as though you are a stranger in a strange place. Or a stranger in a familiar place. Or simply a little strange.

Well, we are all of those things. We are all a little strange. And we are all strangers here in some way or another. But we also belong here. We are strangers who belong.

Because when does a stranger stop being a stranger? When others recognize them as a regular? Or when they stop feeling like an outsider? Because the two don't always happen at the same time. There are still days I walk into the chapel to lead services and STILL feel like a stranger. I expect this may be true for some of you sitting here today. This may be the place you grew up, your picture may be on the wall of Confirmation, you may come here every week. But today, for whatever reason you feel like a stranger. Let me tell you something though - you are not. You are as regular as the most regular. You are as much a staple at this service as the organ. And were you to walk into this space on a random Shabbat, your voice would be as important as mine. You are not a stranger here.

We are commanded to love the stranger. Love the stranger as we love ourselves. Welcome the stranger because we know what it feels like to be a stranger. Welcome the stranger because we are the stranger. Because we are all a little strange.

We are all strangers. We are all strange.

And so, in some ways, no one is a stranger. No one is strange.

Hinei mah tov uma'na'im shevet achim gam yachad

How good it is to be gathered together.

Hinei mah tov uma'na'im shevet achim gam yachad

Welcome. One and all. Long time member and visiting guest. We are all here beyachad. Strangers today but not forever. A little strange but in just the right place.

We are all welcome here. Today, next week, any day of the year. All are welcome in every form - straight from the gym, with kids carrying fruit snacks, suits and ties, dresses and slacks. All are welcome at all times.

And yet, every time you walk through these doors, sit in these pews, remember you are a stranger here. Strange to someone. But you are home here. This space is yours. It is yours, it is mine, it is the young parent's, the transplant's, the convert's. It is here for the children, the aged, those raised with a song in each prayer, and those with the solemn air of spoken word and classical tropes. This space is now, has been, and will continue to be yours and mine. For the stranger and the strange. It is today. It was yesterday. And it will be tomorrow.

I want to challenge you today. Challenge you as you enter this new year. As you face these ten days of awe and perhaps more importantly, the days after. I want to challenge you to welcome the strange, welcome the stranger - both internal and external. Ours is a thriving, beautiful community. In spite of a global pandemic, and an ever-changing reality of what is "normal", our TBK family continues to grow. We have continued to shine and inspire, becoming a destination for families, individuals, retirees, and everyone in between. And the only way we continue to do this is by continuing to embrace the strange, embrace the stranger. I want to challenge you today to be a beacon of welcome. To turn away from fear of the other, fear of the unknown, fear of what is different.

Love the stranger as yourself and light blinded you'll find that inner and outer worlds are one. You are both the outsider and the insider. The stranger and the regular. Every time you are here, you are both greeter and gatekeeper. And your job as gatekeeper is to open the gates wide to embrace all those who enter. Whether they look like you or not. Whether they pray like you or not. This space is big enough for all the strangers and all that is strange. What is strange to you might be customary to me. And what is customary to you might be strange to another. But it all comes together. We all come together.

Hinei mah toy, umanaim, shevet achim gam yachad.

Shana Tovah.

May this year be a year of open hearts, open arms, open doors. May this year be a year where the stranger is no longer strange.