

Foreigner or Resident: Which Are We?

My grandchildren's favorite movie these days is a clever Disney musical called – "Descendants." The primary characters are descendants of some classic Disney characters such as Captain Hook and others. The musical is so popular it has had several sequels. I was thinking about this because a recent article in the *Washington Post* tells about the formation of a new society of descendants of America's presidents.

Clifton Truman Daniel shared the story of when he was in first grade, and each child was supposed to tell the class something about his or her family. Daniel gave his name and sat down. The teacher probed a bit, and asked him, "Wasn't your grandfather president of the United States?" When he got home he asked his mother, Margaret Truman, "Mom, did you know Grandpa Truman was president of the US?"

The narratives in Genesis are concerned with descendants. They tell us of the stories and wanderings of the first family and families of the Jewish people, for we are their descendants. The genealogies, the lists of who begat whom allow us to know the lineage and offspring of our early ancestors and the nations whose histories are intertwined with theirs, and thereby by extension, ours as well.

When Abraham sets about to purchase a burial plot for his beloved wife Sarah who has just died, he describes himself as a "*ger v'toshav*." Scholars tell us that this may have been a technical term, describing a status, the rough equivalent of what today is known in America as a "green card," a work/status visa. *Ger v'toshav* literally means that one is a stranger (or alien) and a dweller, as in a foreigner who dwells among you. The JPS translates it as "resident alien." The Art Scroll translation takes a more literal approach and defines *ger v'toshav* as "I am an alien and a resident," meaning that he is a stranger and a citizen among the people where he is living.

The term is ambiguous and inherently contradictory, yet very prescient. Which is it: Is he a citizen, or a stranger; a foreigner or a resident?

The paradox reflects and characterizes the ambiguous place he and his offspring will play in society.

We pray for the welfare of the government each shabbat, in whatever country we inhabit. We contribute and become active participants in the life of the country where we live, often rising to positions of leadership. Jews in America take pride in our civic responsibility and vote in disproportionate numbers.

Yet throughout our history, we have epitomized and lived in the tension of this contradictory status – as active participants in society wherever we live, while at the same time, not yet being fully accepted or integrated. It explains a whole genre of American literature, by Jewish American writers, written from the perspective of being considered outsiders and observers.

I recall a trip I took a number of years ago to Budapest and Vienna with the Rabbinic Cabinet of the UJA.

In Budapest, I saw a headstone from the 5th century with a menorah etched into it. This headstone came from a Jewish cemetery, meaning that Jews had been living in Hungary since at least the 400's. I subsequently learned that the people from whom Hungarians were descended didn't arrive in Hungary until the 900's. In other words - Jews were in Hungary about 500 years prior to the arrival of Hungarians. And yet, when the Nazi regime came to power in the 1940's, their long history in the country was ignored and the Jews were treated as foreign interlocutors, as strangers, as outsiders.

The memorial wall at the synagogue in Vienna, Austria made a lasting impression on me. Engraved on it were the names of the members of the congregation who had fought and died in World War I as soldiers on behalf of Austria. It was an impressive array of many names. Yet, all of this was forgotten – the patriotism, the civic pride, the heroism of those men who made the ultimate sacrifice for their country, all of it was shunt aside and immaterial, as Jews were rounded up and turned over to the Nazis for extermination just a few short decades later. No longer did they enjoy the status of being *toshavim*, residents and citizens. Now they were treated as *gerim* – as foreigners and strangers.

So when Abraham says, "*Ger v'tosha anochi* – I am a stranger and a resident among you", it is as if he is saying, "I am part of you, but I will always be a part from you."

We should never lose sight of this, as we struggle to belong to the society where we live, while at the same time, seeking to preserve our identity as Jews. For it is as Jews that we most enrich our surroundings, bringing our ethical teachings and way of life to improve the lot of others. Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik put it this way, "A Jew must always be ready to be a lonely alien, resisting the culture that surrounds him and maintaining his unique responsibility."

This approach captures the history of our people throughout the ages. The popular description of the tenuous position of our being like a "fiddler on the roof" accurately portrays our efforts to achieve a balance, to be like Abraham, a *toshav*, a resident and citizen, while knowing that we are often viewed as *gerim*, as aliens and temporary, as guests by others. Appreciating the tension inherent in the contradiction is a balance we must achieve to survive as a people while being a "light unto the nations."

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
November, 2021
B'nai Tzedek, Potomac, MD
Potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org