

Leshana Tovah!

This year our synagogue is studying the value of Welcoming the Stranger.

I want to start by saying thank you to everyone who took time to respond to my various emails and Facebook posts asking for your experiences, welcoming or being welcomed. I will be sharing just a couple of insights from these stories, but all of the responses were very helpful.

Also, I want to say from the beginning that though I have heard many stories about ways that individuals felt welcomed at Bnai Keshet, the process of asking about welcoming brought up more than a few responses from people who had in one way or another experienced our community effort to welcome as falling short. Suffice it to say that I felt renewed certainty that spending time this year focusing on this value was a good idea.

The obligation to Welcome the Stranger is actually rooted in two different though deeply related *mitzvot*:

HACHNASAT ORCHIM

The first *mitzvah*/commandment is simply to be welcoming; being a warm and friendly host. This *mitzvah* is called – *hachnasat orchim* – hospitality to guests. Now hospitality is no small *mitzvah*.

Think of the story of Abraham, standing at the entrance to his tent in the heat of a desert day he looked up and saw three men in the distance. Now these were people he did not know,

But He rushes to welcome them, and puts **their needs** ahead of his own. He is humble, calling these men, lord and bowing before them.

He is concerned with their physical needs, he invites them into his tent, and he washes their feet.

And with Sarah's help generously, serves a feast when bread and water might have been enough.

Hospitality, *hachnasat orchim* is required for friends and family, but also for people who we don't know or are just meeting. People we might call strangers.

In our culture someone we don't know is called a stranger, and with that title comes a certain degree of suspicion.

But the Torah, seems unaware of this concern.

In fact this kind of person isn't even called a stranger.

Being kind to someone you don't know is the norm.

Being very kind is the sign of a righteous person.

PROTECT THE STRANGER

The Torah is very concerned with another kind of stranger - the *ger*. *Ger* in Hebrew is a neutral word related in meaning to *lagur* to dwell. The *ger* is the foreigner, the non-Israelite, the slave, who dwells with us.

Member Linda Brumbach emailed to me sharing this story:

Recently, I went to Tel Aviv and walked to the Southern part of the city where I had never explored and found myself in a park where everyone else seemed to be African immigrants. My girlfriend and I were the only white people in this section of town. When we arrived at the main square park, we sat under a tree and after a while, a family wandered in gorgeously dressed looking like they were just coming out of a wedding.

They walked over to the tree, circled around us and said "welcome" and told us their names. After about 5 minutes of small talk, they walked away.

I was so deeply moved and wondered if that family would be welcomed the way we were on the other side of Tel Aviv in the fancy park.

The 2nd commandment that the value of Welcoming the Stranger is rooted in is our obligation **not to wrong the stranger**.

In the Talmud (Bava Metzia 59b) Rabbi Eliezer teaches that the Torah tells us 36 times, and some say 46, to watch out for the wellbeing of the *ger*, the stranger.

This second *mitzvah* commands us to Welcome **the Stranger**.

When the Torah commands us to treat the *ger* with kindness and fairness it isn't talking about someone we don't know but rather the "other" in our midst.

It is some indication of the challenge of this mitzvah that later interpretation seeks to narrow this expansive category, to the point where many traditionalist read it as only applying to converts to Judaism.

But the language of the Torah is expansive and crystal clear.

Just as we weren't converts in Egypt, but were strangers,
so the *ger* stranger among us is unlikely to be a convert.

The Torah is not concerned with **our safety in relation to strangers**,
but is concerned with the stranger's safety in relation to us.

The Torah recognizes that the minority, the foreigner and anyone labeled by a culture as strangers because of their otherness, are vulnerable and easily abused.

K'ezrach mikem yihiye lakhem hager hagar itkhem

When the stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong them.

The strangers who resides with you shall be as your citizens; (Lev. 19:33-34)

It is a sign of this vulnerability that we are commanded so many times, that the same laws that apply to us should apply to the stranger; that we should do business with them fairly, that we should set aside tithes and food for their wellbeing, that they should enjoy the benefits of our festivals and Sabbaths, that they should be treated as citizens.

FOR YOU WERE STRANGERS IN THE LAND OF EGYPT

A short exert from a Facebook message I received from Gina Pastino:

Rabbi, what keeps coming to mind when I read your posts about loving a stranger is PFLAG (Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians and Gays). When I first came out to my family they had a really hard time. At one point my father threw me out of the house. What got me through that time the most were the parents at PFLAG. The only thing they knew about me was that I was a young Lesbian and that my own family didn't know how to love me because of it. So they gave me all of their love with no expectation of anything in return.

Ki gerim hay'tem be'ereetz mitzrayim –
for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Lev. 19:34)

Just to state the obvious, Jews know something about what it is to be a stranger, a *ger*. Not only were our grandparents or great-grandparents immigrants, but generations before that their grandparents were immigrants newly arrived in Russia or Germany, in Spain or Italy, in Morocco or Iraq or Egypt.

As foreigners and second-class citizens we knew both what it meant to prosper and be protected and what it meant to be oppressed and taken advantage of.

At our very core we share something in common with the stranger that is summed up every time we repeat the phrase, *Ki gerim hay'tem be'ereetz mitzrayim*. For you, were strangers in the land of Egypt.

This is the central narrative of the Jewish people.
The Torah is all about the impact of being strangers in Egypt.
It is the story of how famine drove us to a foreign land.
How when we prospered there, Pharaoh came to fear us and took advantage us, enslaved us and murdered our children.
It is the story of our liberation and prolonged healing from this trauma.

The Jewish people in the Torah are always strangers. We are strangers enslaved for 400 years. We are recently freed strangers wandering through foreign wilderness for 40 years. When in the Torah we are finally ready to enter the promised land; the book ends and we roll it back to the beginning.

Hebrews

Hebrews - *Ivrim*, is the first name we receive as a people, first used for Abraham but later for all the Israelites while in Egypt. (Gen. 14:13)

The root for the word Hebrew, *iver* is עבר which means to cross over, to pass.

I was reminded by Bnai Keshet member, Adam Lautman that this word is taught to have been first applied to Abraham to describe him as a stranger, a river crosser, from over on the other side of the Euphrates.

When we are called *Ivrim* - Hebrews by the Egyptians it is not a friendly term. It has the negative connotations of other words that share this root: *averah*, transgression, or *avaryon*, criminal.

Bnai Israel – Children of Israel, Israelites is the name we call ourselves, but others call us – *Ivrim*, immigrants, aliens, the ones who are trying to pass for residents.

Abraham

And even before Egypt our forefathers and foremothers were strangers in Canaan. The very first instruction, given to Abraham, the very first Jew was to make himself a stranger.

Adonay said to Avram, "Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from the house of your father to the land that I will show you." (Gen 11:1-4)

Abraham and Sarah are told to go to an unknown place; to leave their families, their native land and live in a foreign, sometimes hostile, place.

Why couldn't Abraham and Sarah have just stayed where they were? Why did they have to leave?

Our experience tells us that there is something essential that can be learned from the experience of being the stranger.

In the Torah it is often part of the process for coming to know God.

Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, writes that our experience as strangers from Abraham and Sarah to our most recent history teaches the imperative that:

"The proper response to having suffered abuse is not vengeance or entitlement, but sensitivity and determination to prevent such abuse of others, including and especially strangers." [p.716 *A Woman's Torah Commentary*]

LOVE THE STRANGER

Linda Garrett Greenberg shared with me:
How I wish you had known my mother.
She hugged everyone she ever met, with or without good reason. Her parting comment was routinely,
"God loves you, and so do I."

Of these 36 times, [some say 46,] that we are commanded to look out for the wellbeing of the stranger two remarkably command us to *love the stranger*. When concluding the terms of the covenant between us and God, Deuteronomy says:

Cut away, therefore the thickening of your hearts and stiffen your necks no more For your God יהוה [is God supreme and Lord supreme, the great, the mighty, the awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but] upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, providing food and clothing. You too must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deut. 10:16-19)

The spiritual path is summed up:
To be like God, Cut away the thickening of your hearts and stiffen your necks no more...
Simply **quit being callous. Open your hearts**, let go of stubbornness and self-centered pride.
Look around you for those who are mistreated or in danger and help them.

In Leviticus we are told:
....you shall love [the stranger as] yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I יהוה am your God. (Leviticus 19:34)

In Hebrew this is:
Ve'ahavta lo komocha

Ve'ahavta Where have we heard that word before?
There are two other times we are commanded to love, *ve'ahavta*

One is repeated every time we say the *Shema* and is written on the walls of our synagogue:

Dev. 6:5 God

5. You must love יהוה, your God, with your whole heart, with every breath, and with all your strength.

ה. וְאַהֲבַתְּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ
וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מַאֲדְךָ:

We are commanded to love God.

Lev. 19 Fellow

The other *ve'ahavta*, commandment to love?

18. you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה:

Tamar Cohn Eskenazi teaches, “**The three commandments, *ve'ahavta adonai – love God, ve'ahavata re'echa –love your fellow, and ve'ahavta lo – love the stranger, are three dimensions of a single, deep connection: to love God is to love others, those like us and those who are not*”.** p. 716

These commandments to love, demand an emotional to shift from a selfish to generous,
From self focused fear of rejection to open hearted courage.
From a narrow perspective to an expansive one.

Kamocha

A past member of the board wrote:
I feel safe and part of the community and also not included at different times,
often a moment apart.
Included and excluded.
Welcomed and overlooked.
I feel reconnected when someone pays caring attention,
but especially feel connect by giving **of myself**,
by giving **someone else what they need**.

There is another way we use the word stranger, when it is not directed externally towards a person we don't know or a person who seems different, but instead to describe our own experience of estrangement.

It isn't only that we have a collective memory of what it means to be a stranger,
but we have personal, likely recent memory of being a stranger.
We know what it is to walk into a room of unfamiliar faces.
We know what it means to be in a familiar place and still feel out of place.
We all, sometimes even with friends and family, have felt like strangers.

For all kinds of reasons we have felt alienated, disconnected and estranged.

Sometimes these experiences seem distant and infrequent.
But sometimes we find ourselves feeling estranged often, perhaps daily, perhaps right now.

So as our congregation begins its year of work on embracing the value of welcoming the stranger, we all have a vested interest in fulfilling the commandment to love the stranger.

My fellow Rabbi and former Bnai Keshet Intern, Ezra Weinberg suggested in a Facebook post that there is a fourth commandment to love, that in addition to loving God, our neighbors and strangers, we must love ourselves.

This is a hidden commandment.

Some would suggest that it is hidden in the commandment to love God. Since our tradition teaches that we are all created in the image of God, the commandment to love one's self, is rooted in our obligation to love God.

Others suggest that it is not so hidden and is right on the surface of the commandments to love our fellow and the stranger *kamocha* – as yourself. You shall love the stranger, *as yourself*. [R. Adam Zeff and Rabbi Ariann Weitzman]

This reading suggests that we can only fulfill these commandments if we love ourselves.

But it is hard when we are alone, or feeling alienated to feel loving towards ourselves.

In fact, moments of estrangement often come side by side with our darkest judgments of our selves.

But the antidote to our own estrangement comes through embracing others with concrete acts of love and kindness and welcome.

This is implicit, in the story that I began with of Abraham welcoming the three strangers.

Their visit concludes with the blessing that Sarah will have a son. And shortly after this God speaks directly to Abraham.

The path of blessing that comes from fulfilling the commandments, to love others, is the very same path that leads us to feel more love for ourselves.

When we concretize love through acts compassion, greeting someone we don't know, bringing food to the bereaved, protecting the rights of immigrants - with each loving action to help another, our own estrangement recedes.

Through loving action we build experiences of connection. This is where I believe the fourth commandment is hidden.

Rather than love the stranger, **like** you love yourself.

I would read the verse, love stranger, **so** you can love yourself.

I would like to conclude with the poem,
With that Moon Language by the 14th century poet Hafez:

Admit something:
Everyone you see, you say to them,
“Love Me.”
Of course you don’t do this out loud;
Otherwise,
Someone would call the cops.
Still though, think about this,
This great pull in us to connect.

Why not become the one
Who lives with a full moon in each eye
That is always saying
With that sweet moon
Language
What every other eye in this world
Is dying to
Hear.

May this year be filled with the blessing that comes when we love the stranger.
Leshanah Tovah.