

When I read the email from Rabbi Elliott inviting me to do a devarlette during these High Holidays, I felt surprised, honored, flattered, to be asked, but my overwhelming response was visceral, heart-pounding anxiety. What, I wondered, did I have to say about welcoming the stranger? How would people react to what I was saying? How would I look? What should I wear? Because the concept of welcoming the stranger was percolating through all of this, it occurred to me that I was, in essence, asking: How can I feel comfortable speaking to all those potentially judgmental strangers? And then I realized—wait, this is Bnai Keshet; these are not strangers!

For quite a few years I've kept a very low profile at Bnai Keshet. Until I joined Rabbi Ariann's Lunch and Learn study group last fall, my actual participation was pretty much limited to Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and very occasional Friday night services. So at a superficial level I am unfamiliar to many of you, as you are to me. But at a more profound level we are not at all strangers, because the choice we have each made to be part of this congregation says something essential about how we live our lives.

We members of Bnai Keshet differ in many details of our experiences and situations. We participate to varying degrees in the rituals and practices of Judaism. Some of us question or reject the existence of God. But we share a commitment to create an inclusive community that respects and accepts these differences, that makes room for anyone who wishes to be here. The simple knowledge of this shared value affirms for me that I am not among strangers. And so, even though I am more often absent than present at Bnai Keshet, it is, for me, always a place of welcome.