

We've done it today, maybe an hour or so ago, perhaps minutes ago. We do it almost everyday. We welcome a stranger, or are ourselves, the stranger being welcomed. Whether it's the Mona Lisa smiles we smile on the train, at the checkout counter; the simple conversation born out of a wait in line; or a group of unknowns that open their house of worship to us, so that we may welcome the greater community, we are welcomed, engaging with one another.

Yet, sometimes our natural instincts place defensive barriers around us so ingrained that we are hardly aware of them. It's a little ironic given our survival depends on reaching out for help, teamwork. But helping someone you know and someone you don't, are two different breeds. When we help a friend or relative, we are guaranteed a return on the investment. It makes us feel really good. We give whatever we can, and take away personal satisfaction and fulfillment when we know we've made a difference.

But reaching out to a stranger is another story. Fear of the unknown makes its grand entrance here. Act 1 - A stranger walks into the room. You glance briefly at one another.  
Act 2- Magically, an invisible shield wraps itself around you, comfortable and protective. You want to say hello to this person, but you're unable to break through the shield. After a second or two, you manage to extend your hand.... the stranger ignores you, turns, and walks away.  
Act 3- Out of nowhere an itch develops on your head, and the extended hand morphs into the head scratch and you walk away. The End.

My apology for the corny three act metaphor for rejection, but there is always the possibility of the alternate happy ending....

As chair of the Hesed committee at BK, I am called on from time to time to visit or call someone I don't know that well, or know at all. By nature, I happen to be a friendly sort of gal, yet when that inevitable email pops up in my subject line, "So & so happy occasion, please congratulate, so & so in stress, please call." On a dime, my stomach instantly knots in anticipation and anxiety, and I grow a second head, with the following thoughts spewing out of it. " Ugh, they don't know me, I don't want to bother them, or intrude on what is most likely a very personal, trying time. Why did they ask me to be the Hesed chair? Why did I say 'yes?' Oh, because I'm friendly, warm even..... but really I'm not. I'm a nasty, cold, uncaring person who really can't make this call!"... all playing out as the monotonous ringtones drone on. And then I hear, "Hello?" My second head evaporates as my self absorbed thoughts shift from me to them. I take my cues from there, still unsure if my call will be pure intrusion or welcome relief.

With a stranger there is no guarantee. No give and take. Just give. Here, we simply act on faith. Maybe we'll be lucky enough to get personal gratification, maybe we won't, but we'll do it because it is the right thing to do, with no return on the investment.

I know I'm not shedding any great insight here. This is nothing you don't know already; that every now and then we must break through our barriers, step out of our comfort zones and help someone we've never met, or just say hello to them. It's easier for some than others, but easy is

not an option. Plain and simple, the unknown doesn't make us feel good. Embrace the unknown. Hold hands with the question mark and walk with faith, no matter the outcome. We do it almost everyday, however big or small.

At the very least, that person you didn't know before, is not a stranger anymore.