

“KI GERIM HEYITEM”

“FOR WE WERE STRANGERS . . .”

YOM KIPPUR SERMON 5777

Immigration has been a central issue this year both nationally and globally, and for Jews this issue is not abstract. If your family emigrated from Eastern Europe, when you talk about immigration, you’re talking about your Boube. So I want to share with you a story about my Boube. I told it when Mark Hetfield, CEO of HIAS was here, but since then I checked in with the matriarchs of my family and have a revised version.

My Boube, who emigrated from Kiev to the United States in 1908, raised 5 children on her own after her husband died at 30 years old of a burst appendix. She couldn’t read or write English, but she was strong and managed to support the family with a dry goods store out in the country in Billerica. When her children were grown, she visited her daughter and son-in-law in Buffalo, where they

were living. It was during the war and it was hard to buy certain consumer goods in the US, so people would cross the border into Canada to shop. My great aunt and uncle decided to take my Boube across the border for the day, but my Boube, though she came to the country legally, didn't have a license or any identification. So they coached her. "Rose, when the man at the border asks you where you are from, you say "born and Boston raised in Boston, ok?" "Born in Boston raised in Boston." "Good. Now what do you say?" "Born in Boston raised in Boston." "Born in Boston raised in Boston."

So they reach the border and the patrol looks in the car and asks my Boube, "where are you from?"

"Russia."

His face grew serious and he asked, "how old are you?"

In Yiddish, my Boube answers, "none of your *farshtunkene* business."

“What did she say?” The border patrol asked. My uncle translated word for word. I guess the border officer didn’t want to mess with my Boube so he just let them all through.

All Jews in America are either immigrants or descendants of immigrants. In this congregation, some of us are descended from the small number of *sefaredim* who immigrated in the 17th or 18th century, some from German Jews of the 19th century, and many from the millions of Eastern European Jews in the late 19th early 20th century. Some of our families escaped from Europe just before World War II, or found refuge just after. Some of our families emigrated from Egypt, Morocco, Hungary, France, Poland, and from many other places. All of us have members in our family who know what it means to leave home, to try to make a new home, to be a refugee, to not know where to go, to be different, to be scapegoated, to be spurned. Seeking refuge, experiencing the life of the stranger--that is at the center of our story. That story begins not with our coming to America,

but with Abraham and Sarah themselves. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says, “to be a Jew is be a stranger.” So at a time when there are 65 million displaced people (one in every 113 people globally), including 6 out of 10 Syrians, we need to speak from our experience. At a time when xenophobia and hatred of immigrants has once again come to the surface in our politics, when more than half the nations’ governors said a year ago they will not permit the resettlement of Syrian refugees in their states, we need to speak from our history and from our Torah.

In the Torah, the word for stranger is *ger*, a sojourner living in a land not his or her own. In today’s language you could translate *ger* as the immigrant, the migrant, the refugee, or in American legal terms the resident alien. The father and mother of our people, Abraham and Sarah, were *gerim*. *Ger v’toashav anochi*, Abraham says, I am a *ger*, a sojourner (Gen. 23:4). They migrated from Mesopotamia to Canaan, then to Egypt looking for food, and back to Canaan.

As *gerim*, they were vulnerable to abuse from people who would take advantage of them, as the story of their time in Egypt shows, where Abraham feared for his life and Sarah was taken into the harem of the Pharaoh.

Back in Canaan, God reveals to Abraham that “your offspring will be strangers (*gerim*) in a land not theirs” (Gen. 15:13). When this comes to be, generations later, it is another stranger, Moses, who is their leader. Moses is a stranger in Pharaoh’s house as an Israelite and a stranger to the Israelites as an Egyptian. He runs away to a completely different place, Midian, where he marries and names his child *Gershon*, for “I have been a stranger in a foreign land” (Ex. 2:22; 18:3).

Eventually, of course, the Israelites will cross the Jordan into their new home, the Land of Israel. Will they finally shed their designation of *ger*, stranger, when they cross over to the Promised Land? No, not even when they are at home in the land of Israel. For God reminds them in

Leviticus that while they will be given land, it will not be theirs to sell beyond reclaim, “for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me” (Lev. 25:23). In other words, God is the only “native” in this world, the rest of us are strangers and whatever we own or whatever place we have are gifts of grace from God. The condition of being a stranger is here used not in a geo-political sense but a spiritual and theological one. We are all guests of God here on this earth, and that has ethical as well as spiritual implications. If we regard ourselves as strangers, no matter our accent or our passport, we are more likely to be compassionate toward others who may be strangers to us, but really are strangers *like* us.

The way we treat strangers is one of the central moral teachings of the Torah. The Talmud teaches (BT Bava Metzia 59b) that the Torah commands us to treat the stranger justly and compassionately a total of 36 times, and some say 46. The great Torah teacher Nechama Leibowitz wrote, “No

other mitzvah, not even the commandment to love God [or] keep the Sabbath . . . [is] so often referred to . . .” (p. 380 Studies in Shemot vol 2).

The stranger is understood as someone who needs special protection because they are vulnerable to abuse either politically or economically. Our greatest commentators, Rashi, Rambam (Maimonides) and Ramban, all suggest that people think they can get away with abuse of the *ger* because the stranger has the least power, the least connections, the least resources, in the society. This is as true today as it was in biblical times. Undocumented workers, for example, in our country may be abused because they are afraid to report it. If they go to the authorities to report, they may get deported. The commentators, however, point out that while we may think there is no one to protect the *ger*, there actually is someone watching and someone on their side, and that is God. “The reason you oppress [the stranger], the Ramban says, is because he has no one to save him from

your hand, but in reality, he will be helped more than any other man.” How? Because God is on the side of the oppressed, and just as he saved the Israelites from Pharaoh, so God will save whomever *we* oppress in our own land. As it is written in the book of Exodus, “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to Me.” Ex. 22:20-23).

The Torah warns, therefore, “you shall have one law for the stranger and citizen alike for I am the Lord your God (Lev. 24:22). And, (Deut. 24:14-15) “You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, whether a fellow countryman or a stranger . . . you must pay his wages on the same day, before the sun sets, for he is needy and urgently depends on it . . .”

Notice that the earlier verse from Exodus says “you shall not *wrong* a stranger or *oppress* him.” Our

commentators asked, what is the difference between “wrong” and “oppress?” To “Oppress,” they explain, refers to economic oppression, and we note that the Torah uses the same word to describe the oppression of a *ger* as it does the oppression of the Israelite slaves in Egypt. That kind of economic oppression of immigrants goes on today in many situations, for example, in the tomato fields in Florida, where there has been slave like conditions, and where the Coalition of Immokalee Workers have organized to make changes.¹ Imagine if those verses from the Torah were in the personnel manual of every industry that depends on migrant, immigrant or undocumented workers. Essentially that is what they are fighting for.

The verse in Torah also says you shall not “wrong” a stranger. What does it mean to “wrong” a stranger? Our commentators say that to “wrong” a stranger is to wrong him or her with words, to use words to insult their dignity. We see this today as well, with some people stereotyping

immigrants, calling them criminals, inciting hatred or exploiting stereotypes. Our commentators say that this is actually worse than taking advantage of someone economically, for while one can return money, it is harder to return one's reputation. Words count in Judaism, and using hateful words is as bad if not worse in some cases than actions.

One reason that the Torah teaches us so emphatically to act justly toward the stranger is that the stranger, like the widow or orphan in the Torah, is more vulnerable, and people with power and resources must be particularly careful in the way they treat those who are powerless or without resources. But there is another reason the Torah teaches that we Jews need to treat the stranger with compassion, and that is our history. "You shall not oppress a stranger," Exodus teaches, "for you know the soul of a stranger, having been yourself strangers in the land of Egypt (*ki gerim heyitem b'erez mitzrayim*)." Ex. 23:9. In other words, we

need to act out of empathy. To command empathy is radical enough, but the Torah, does not stop even there. It commands even more than empathy. It commands us to *love* the stranger as ourselves. Leviticus says, “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt *ki gerim heyitem b’eretz mitzrayim*, I am your God” (Lev. 19:33-34). And again in Deuteronomy, “God . . . loves the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. You must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt *ki gerim heyitem b’eretz mitzrayim.*” (Deut. 10:12-19)

The phrase “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt/ *ki gerim heyitem b’eretz mitzrayim*” is repeated over and over in the Torah. When I was a rabbinical student and making my own Tallis, I wanted to choose a verse in the Torah to put on the *attarah*. The verse I chose was *ki gerim*

heyitem b'eretx mitzrayim. For me it is at the core of the Torah. Justice and compassion must come from empathy.

The teachings about the stranger underlie all of Jewish ethics, and are reflected in the liturgy and Torah readings of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The word *ger* occurs in the Kol Nidrei service. Immediately after Kol Nidrei, we sing: *v'nislach l'chol adat b'nai Yisrael v'lager hagar b'togam ki l'chol ha'am shgaga*. “The whole Israelite community and the stranger residing among them shall be forgiven . . .” The most awesome moment of the year, Kol Nidrei, specifically reminds us to fully integrate the *ger* in our communities.

The words *V'lager hagar*, “the stranger who resides . . .” may remind you of the woman about whom we read on Rosh Hashanah. Hagar, is the name of Sarah’s maidservant, a surrogate mother who gives birth to Ishmael, Abraham’s son. Her name literally means “the stranger” and as we see, she is indeed a *ger* who is vulnerable in Abraham household, thrown out along with her son Ishmael by Sarah who is

jealous and protective of Isaac's position. Hagar is an Egyptian, and Egypt is a powerful empire where Abraham and Sarah were *gerim* and where the Israelites will soon be again. In an example of biblical karma, Hagar, the Egyptian stranger in the land of Israel, is banished by the father of the Israelites, who will themselves be strangers in the land of Egypt. God hears all of their cries. And as Deuteronomy teaches, since God is on the side of the oppressed and loves the stranger, we must as well. There is nothing inherently native or foreign about any of us. We all could be either. And the truth is that we are all both. As contemporary philosopher Julia Kristeva wrote in her book *Strangers to Ourselves*, "Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners."²

Today the world is facing a global refugee crisis on an unprecedented scale, with “1 person in 113 . . . displaced from their homes by conflict and persecution in 2015.”³ “The willingness of nations to work together not just for refugees but for the collective human interest is what’s being tested today,” wrote the UN High Commissioner for refugees⁴ “and it’s this spirit of unity that badly needs to prevail.”

Yet we have a ways to go to embody that spirit. Let’s take a difficult look at where we are as a country regarding the *ger*. From 2009 to 2014 non-criminal deportations, were at record highs. (Though that policy has changed this past year, the numbers are not out yet for 2015.) Only 10,000 Syrian refugees have been admitted, a very small number compared to the enormity of the crisis and what smaller countries are doing. And yet 53% of Americans don’t want to accept any Syrian refugees at all with an additional 11% wanting to accept only Christians.⁵ So 64% of Americans don’t want to admit any Syrian Muslim refugees,

and prejudice against Muslims in America whether Muslim immigrants or American born, along with other immigrants, remains high and has been exploited and intensified for political gain. This has not been because of a large influx of immigrants that we cannot assimilate. On the contrary, the percentage of the foreign born in our population has risen only 1 percentage point in the entire decade.⁶ Rather, as a Pew Research Center report has shown, “American opposition to admitting large numbers of foreigners fleeing war and oppression has been pretty consistent, regardless of official government policy.”

We as Jews experienced this opposition tragically, before during and after WWII, when the U.S. limited the number of Jewish refugees admitted to the country. Fear was stoked against those refugees then as now. Nicholas Kristof, in a column last month entitled “Anne Frank today is a Syrian Girl,” reminded us that after Kristallnacht in 1938, a poll found that 94 percent of Americans disapproved of Nazi

treatment of Jews, but 72 percent still objected to admitting large numbers of Jews. The reasons for the opposition then were the same as they are for rejecting Syrians or Hondurans today: We can't afford it, we should look after Americans first, we can't accept everybody, they'll take American jobs, they're dangerous and different.”⁷ Politicians don't create the hate. They stoke it and exploit it. It is we the people, ourselves, who need to look within, and heed the teachings in the Torah regarding the stranger.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks quotes the insightful thought by Rabbi Hayyim ibn Attar from the 18th century that we can learn from. “It may be, he says, that the very sanctity that the Israelites feel as children of the covenant may lead them to look down on those who lack a similar lineage. Therefore they are commanded not to feel superior to the *ger*, but instead to remember the degradation their ancestors experienced in Egypt. As such, it comes a command of humility in the face of strangers.”⁸

We proudly proclaim our country as the best in the world. We are right to feel the blessing of our American heritage. But we are not right to think we are better in any way than other human beings. Our specialness as a country is because of our diversity not in spite of it. Acting from the Torah principles of love and compassion will only make us greater.

Our synagogue this year officially joined the HIAS Welcome Campaign, Jewish congregations who have signed a statement in support of welcoming refugees to the United States.⁹ I do not discount legitimate concerns around issues of security and numbers that people may have, and those issues can and should be addressed. While I do not imagine immigration policy to be without challenges, if we start from love and empathy, as the Torah commands, we come much closer to just policies.

On Yom Kippur we imagine the gates of the Temple and the gates of heaven open to receiving our prayers. Our

concluding Neila service uses the metaphor of the gates throughout. In our prayer book are the poetic phrases “*Patach lanu sha’ar* open for us the gates . . .” and *Pitchu li sha’arei tzedek* open for me the gates of justice. May we approach the *ger* the stranger within us and without, with an open heart and an open door. As my colleague Rabbi Reena Spicehandler wrote in our prayerbook, “those who pass through the gates of righteousness and open them to others enter God’s gateway . . .”¹⁰ May we have the strength to look within as individuals and as a nation, so that we can enter together.

I wish you all a Hatima Tova and Shana Tova . . .

¹ https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/25/business/in-florida-tomato-fields-a-penny-buys-progress.html?_r=0

² Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 1.

³ UNHCR report by Adrian Edwards, June 20, 2016. <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2016/6/5763b65a4/global-forced-displacement-hits-record-high.html>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/19/u-s-public-seldom-has-welcomed-refugees-into-country/>

⁶ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/06/20/key-facts-about-the-worlds-refugees/>

⁷ Nicholas Kristof, “Anne Frank Today is a Syrian Girl,” NYT, August 25, 2016 <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/25/opinion/anne-frank-today-is-a-syrian-girl.html>

⁸ <http://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-5768-mishpatim-loving-the-stranger/>

⁹ <http://www.hias.org/ask-your-congregation-join-hias-welcome-campaign>

¹⁰ Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat V’Hagim (Wyncote, Pennsylvania: The Reconstructionist Press, 1996), p. 374.