

Love the Stranger
Yom Kippur Morning 2017/5777
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Abram sat in his tent staring at the desert horizon. He must have seen them coming as specks long before he could identify three distinct people. From a distance, he likely tried to identify who they were and why they were approaching. Ultimately he didn't know them. They were strangers. But that only spurred him to action. He raced toward them, invited them in, had food and drink prepared. They were strangers, but he opened his home and welcomed them.¹

Abram, later known as Abraham, had spent his senior years moving place to place. From Ur to Canaan at the command of God; Down to Egypt to avoid famine and starvation; back to Canaan. In each place he found a mixture of welcome and hostility. Such migration continued with his descendants. His grandson Jacob fled Canaan for fear of his life and met deception at the hands of his Uncle Laban. Joseph was sold into slavery into Egypt and spent years in jail on a false charge. While finding welcome at first, Jacob and his sons moved to Egypt, but a generation later the Jewish people found themselves enslaved.

As Jews have moved throughout the world, they have generally found hostility as the locals rejected them as different and strangers. We have been expelled and deported from nearly every country in Europe, and over 100 places. Because of how poorly we have been welcomed, the words of Exodus speak volumes on how we should treat others. Exodus 22 tells us, "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."²

We are an immigrant people – moving to find a better life from the pogrom or accusation of blood libel or ghetto. Technically we have been refugees, who move out of "fear of persecution caused by war, violence, political instability, aggression, or due to their religion (or) political opinion."³

All of us moved to America in some generation past. It might have been your move or your great-grandparents. It might have been some sort of choice to find a better life, or it might have been forced upon you by those that hate us.

We are a people of immigrants and refugees. In today's America, we seem to have forgotten our heritage. All of us came from elsewhere and found a new home in America. Now America seems to have little interest in welcoming today's strangers.

Nir Fisher, a Temple member, came to the US from Israel at age 16. He loved it, but went back to Israel to serve in the army before returning here.

He struggled to find work. Struggled to get a green card. Struggled to become a citizen. But like someone in each of our family's history, he became a citizen of the United States. It can be a long, difficult struggle, but when the goal is achieved it is wonderful.

We live in an America today that isn't interested in anyone's "tired" or "poor" and certainly not their "wretched refuse of [their] teeming shore."⁴

We live in an America now that has a so-called travel ban denying entry to people from Iran, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Chad and North Korea. Many of them refugees fleeing for their life from war and death.⁵

We live in a America that seems content to allow the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program to expire. "800,000 dreamers face the prospect of being driven from their homes. This is a problem with many hands in the making. If you want to blame President Obama for exceeding his authority on this, fine. If you want to blame President Trump for cruelty in rescinding their deferments, fine. If you want to blame President Bush for kicking the can down the road to us today, fine. Blame Congress. I don't care. What matters, from a [Jewish] perspective, is (not finding the blame, but) finding a compassionate solution." ⁶ Deuteronomy 24:16 reminds us that "Parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sin." And Ezekiel 18:28 says that "The child will not share the guilt of the parent."

We live in a America where just this week the White House limited the number of refugees able to come into the United States to 45,000. In the current fiscal year it was 110,000. This is not for immigrants wanting to make a better life; this is for refugees fleeing war, famine, rape, slavery, and death because of who they are or what they believe.⁷

And we live in an America this is focused on building walls.

Not a hundred years ago, Americans, those who were already in this country, treated us with hatred and contempt. And not just us. The Irish, the Italians, the Chinese, and so many others arriving on this shore. Last week we spoke about the darkness in our country where so many people are still treated with loathing for who they are. Our compassion for others, our desire to bring in the light must not be limited to Americans, to those who are already here. We must be welcoming and embracing to the refugees, who aren't much different from our ancestors who fled to this

country for safety. We must welcome the stranger because we know what it is like to be strangers.

The Jewish grandparents of Derrick Ades, a Temple member, met on a boat to Haiti. His dad was often singled out as the white Jewish kid in Haiti. For Derrick, born in the US, but living as a child in both New York and Haiti, immigration is something that some people abuse. He learned the lesson that so many immigrants of all backgrounds strive for – the American dream – If you work hard, you will find success and become an American. But the hatred of the other, the rejection of the stranger challenges our dream.

We know what it is like to be rejected from these shores as a stranger in more modern times, even in our greatest need. The St. Louis was a German steamer carrying 900 Jewish refugees from Germany in 1939. They left behind near certain death. They were turned away by the American Government, both Democrats and Republicans, and not allowed to dock in Miami. Cuba and Canada also refused them. The ocean liner was forced to return to Europe docking in Antwerp, Belgium. The refugees were scattered in France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, and Netherlands. 25% of them died in Hitler's death camps. All would have survived, but America has always been afraid of the other.

Whether skin or nation or language or culture, we fear what we don't already know. But we live in Queens where difference is everywhere and diversity is our strength. And we are Jews. The Talmud teaches that God created us all from the first person so that no human being could ever say, my lineage is greater than yours.⁸ We value each other.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks perhaps said it best. "I used to think that the most important line in the Bible was 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Then I realized that it is easy to love your neighbor because he or she is usually quite like yourself. What is hard is to love the stranger, one whose color, culture or creed is different from yours. That is why the command, 'Love the stranger because you were once strangers,' resonates so often throughout the Bible. It is summoning us now."⁹

There are so many areas where we must continue to be welcoming and embrace the stranger. As a synagogue, we will be offering programs

throughout the year to educate ourselves and attest to our values, to support the immigrant and refugees living in our neighborhoods, and to advocate for those wanting to make a new life in America just like we did. If you want to help us with creating these opportunities, please let me know after the holiday.

We're working hard to develop relationships with likeminded advocacy groups to draw on greater numbers and knowledge. We're creating connections with those not like ourselves – the strangers around us that are become our neighbors.

There is so much you can do too. Start by making your neighbors less of strangers and more of neighbors. Some of you are wonderful at that, but most of us live more anonymously in our New York City world.

Join us for some of the meaningful programs ahead. An interfaith Sukkah dinner with Turkish and Afghani communities under our sukkah. Be a true mensch – learn to be an Upstander and how to better speak up and diffuse situations of tension when they arise. Info on our Upstander Training is in your handout and may be one of the best community gifts you can give yourself.

We are 9 months into one of the most complicated political times of any our lives. If you haven't gotten in the habit of emailing, calling, and expressing your beliefs to your Senators and Representative, its time to start. Remember an issue like DACA has been waiting for Congressional action for year. Every Congressperson is a descendant of immigrants and refugees. Remind them of their past and the need to make a future for others.

"I still have faith in...America. I have faith that we will all heed the call of the prophet Isaiah to be a light to the faith that we will not allow our individual comforts and desires to outweigh our obligation to every other resident of this land. I have faith that we will be upstanders who delve into complex issues with open minds. I have faith that we will work together to bend the arch of history toward justice, to make our nation an exemplar of our highest."¹⁰ I have faith we can welcome and love the stranger and make this a better world and a better America.

¹ Genesis 18:2-8.

² Exodus 22:2

³ http://www.diffen.com/difference/Immigrant_vs_Refugee

⁴ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46550/the-new-colossus>

⁵ <http://www.truah.org/press/mb3/>

⁶ Rabbi Geoff Dennis

⁷ https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2017/09/27/us/27reuters-usa-immigration-refugees.html?_r=0

⁸ Mishnah, Sanhedrin, Chapter 4, Mishnah 5

⁹ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, 'Refugee crisis: 'Love the stranger because you were once strangers' calls us now,' on www.theguardian.com

¹⁰ Rabbi Howard Goldsmith