Who’s the Stranger?

by

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*I´m a stranger in a strange land..*

- Carson McCullers, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter

In *Parshat Ekev*, we are confronted with one of the most compelling – and counter-intuitive – obligations in all Torah. “You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Deut. 10:19) This mitzvah actually appears thirty-six times, double *chai*, in Torah. We have heard it so often and referred to it so regularly that we often lose sight of its power and unsettling demand. We do so at our peril and diminishment.

Too often, we have “tamed” this mitzvah to fit our needs rather than confront the profound – and gracious – imposition that it places upon us. But listen to this command with fresh ears, with the ears of our ancestors, with the ears of a people and a world for whom communal identity was fundamental to self and existence. This command tells us to go against *everything* that our instincts teach us. It tells us to look beyond the familiar and the safe and to see in the one who is different and alien the same fundamental goodness and holiness that God bestows upon all His creatures.

Astonishing!

Why should we look beyond our safe and familiar boundaries and welcome this alien into our embrace? Because his experience and his status is *understandable* to us. After all, we were *gerim* in the land of Egypt. We too know what it means to be the alien, the “other”, the feared and the reprehensible. That experience should inform our understanding of the plight of others.

Too often, it does not.

Even knowing, as Ramban teaches, that we are commanded to love the *ger* because Hashem loves him. We know this because Hashem certainly loves us and *we were strangers too*. Our experience, of pain, our sense of disassociation teaches us that God loves the stranger. And, if God loves the stranger so should we.

*Sefer HaChinuch* tells us that when someone leaves his family and his country of origin to become a “stranger” in a new environment, it is a very difficult adjustment. To survive and to thrive, the stranger needs help and support. We are obligated to provide it.

Our understanding of the *ger* and this mitzvah must be rooted in our *Mitzrayim* experience. For we all must experience the pain and angst of the *galut*, of the wilderness of our souls; none of us can be born redeemed. It is only in our wandering and our wrestling with our lives and our experience that we appreciate redemption and the grace God affords us. Without *galut* there is no grace and redemption. Without the *ger* there is no citizen.

Our destiny is bound in the success of the *ger*. Just as our own experience as strangers brought us to the foot of Sinai, we must recognize that in every *ger* is the potential for a Sinai experience. It is our obligation to help, not hinder; to open our hearts, not harden them.

This mitzvah asks us, demands of us, to challenge the very heart of who we are, to be willing – no, to be *more than* willing, to actively pursue – embracing the experience of the *ger*, to care for the *ger.*

For we were *gerim*…

Such a powerful command. Is it any wonder that so many seek to shirk it? Even the most “religious” among us seek to wrestle from this command its essential demand. How? By defining the “*ger*” in comfortable and familiar terms.

This mitzvah challenges each and every Jew to go beyond, to reach out, to extend a hand, to develop relationships – beyond one’s familiar “turf”. Yet, many observant Jews are inclined to look at *gerim* with crossed eyes. What? Me? Who? Many observant Jews *avoid* any possibility of crossing paths with the *ger*. Most turn a blind eye, telling themselves, “I have enough with our own.” They view the *ba’al teshuva* with even greater scorn than they do the *ger*. Who would want to marry into a *ba’al teshuva* family? Who needs the hassle? After all, “if you aren’t born with it, you can never catch up…”

This perspective dims the consideration to other *gerim*. The divorced. The older, single person. The widow.

There is always a “reasonable” excuse. “I can’t handle that.” “That’s not for me.” “I can’t handle those tears at my Shabbos table.”

“What am I, a social worker? I’m just a simple Jew.”

What about that OTD person? Oye! God spare me from him. Keep him away from my *chevra*. Keep him away from my community, my *shul*. After all, *I can’t be responsible* for every failure out there.

Can I?

“You shall not wrong a stranger, nor oppress him; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 22:20).

In *Ekev*, God tells us that we *are* responsible for the *ger*.

But who *is* the *ger*?

I posed this question to my son, Nathan. He responded with a thoughtful answer which demands our attention. “People think that the admonition not to mistreat *gerim* is a directive at a specific group of people who have unique circumstances that qualify them as ‘*gerim*’. I think the directive is different.  I think anyone in any social situation can *feel* like a *ger*. The new kid in class.  The new guy at the office.  In fact, in any social situation there is likely to be someone that feels like a *ger*—doesn’t have to be a new situation, it’s just the inevitability of a social dynamics.”

With this thoughtful reply, he enlarges the understanding of what it means to *be* a *ger* to those whose place in life *makes them feel like a ger*! Even the one who is part of the community can sometimes feel like a stranger.

Haven’t we all experienced that feeling?

This understanding of the *mitzvah* encourages us to look for the *ger* in every situation and respond supportively and caringly to them, it encourages us to see in the eyes of the estranged divorced men and women who have lost their home, Shabbos table, dignity, and confidence, that stranger that *we were once* in the land of Egypt!

The teens who have become estranged from their homes, yeshivas, *shuls*, and communities? These OTD? *Gerim*. To be treated not with scorn but loving kindness.

Why? Because *we were gerim in the land of Egypt*. Now *they* are *gerim* in their own *mitzrayim* (narrow, tight place). They are boxed in. Lost. And God commands that we treat them with respect, loving kindness, decency. God commands that we treat them in a way that makes clear that redemption is just ahead.

We invest so much of our lives to *belonging*, to being part of our community. Our sense of self, of decency and dignity come from how we see ourselves reflected in the eyes of those closest to us, the eyes of those who we number amongst the “we” of our lives. We are taught from a young age to fear the stranger.

“Do not talk to strangers!”

The “other” is a threat to everything we hold dear; to everything we invest our time and efforts to preserve. In English, “strange” and “stranger” is derived from the root *ejhs*. The derivation gives rise to such terms and ideas as “out of the ordinary”, “unusual”, “striking”.

These terms, and what they imply cause us to shiver, fearing the damaging potential they represent.

We are seeing the rawness of these emotions played out in the current political atmosphere, in which immigrants and people of color are feared as “the other”. They diminish us. They rob our jobs, our resources, our land.

Strangers.

According to some, they are criminals, rapists, gang members. They are, in short, anything but human, anything but God’s creatures currently in the *galut* but in search of their coming redemption.

God does not accept our fear, our incendiary words, our hateful speech and behavior. “You shall not wrong a stranger, nor oppress him; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 22:20).

When we stood at the foot of Sinai, perhaps we had already forgotten the fear and shame of being *gerim*. God demands that we remember, not for ourselves but for others who still feel those demeaning emotions even as we bask in the light of grace.

Who is the *ger*?

We all are.

Who is in *galut*?

We all are.

Who stands at the foot of Sinai?

We all do.

Together.