

“STRANGERS AMONG US”
Rosh Hashanah 5767 (Sept. 24, 2006)
by Robert Bernardo

In 1974, when my family lived in San Francisco’s Richmond District, I remember spending warm, summer afternoons walking along Ocean Beach with my father. Together, we would collect seashells and then head off to Playland, the nearby amusement park (at the time) near 48th Avenue. I remember one day as we were heading back to our apartment, a group of teenagers heading toward us with white flowers in their hair. They wore bright tie-die shirts, multi-colored beads, and sandals. As they walked, they laughed, giggled, smoked...cigarettes and sang songs. I was thrilled to see these young people because they all looked so happy. I looked up and smiled at one of them, as he kindly offered me a piece of candy. As I was about to reach out, my father said, “Wag ka tatanggap sa hindi mo kilala!” Don’t take things from strangers. He smiled at the man, yanked me toward him, and we continued back to the apartment. My family had only been in the United States for four years.

That was my earliest experience with “strangers.” Several years later, my notions were reinforced in Mrs. Roy’s second grade class at Brown Elementary in Daly City. I remember a police officer coming into my class to talk about child safety issues. Officer Bob (yes, his name was Officer Bob) began to explain about never talking to strangers or taking things from strangers—in lessons that came to be known as stranger danger.

Understandably, there is a human tendency to fear strangers. Some bio-sociologists believe that we are programmed with a built-in mechanism to protect us from harmful situations. They say that our intuitive senses help keep us safe—and often times, help keep us alive. How many times have we looked down a dark street at night and seen suspicious people coming toward us, and we felt the urge to cross the street or walk a little faster?

What does Judaism teach us about “ger,” or the “stranger?”

Parashat Mishpatim states, "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Exodus 22:20)." One of the great teachings of Judaism is "hachnasat orchim," welcoming the stranger. The Torah provides over 30 guidelines about our behavior towards the stranger. That's even more than other mitzvot such as loving G-d, keeping the Sabbath, and refraining from eating forbidden foods. The treatment of strangers is one of those rare topics that is listed not only among the 248 commanded acts but also among the 365 prohibited acts.

The Torah also tells us that Abraham would sometimes seek out strangers and offer them a meal. In Parashat Vayera, while being visited by G-d, Abraham sees three strangers passing by his tent in the wilderness. He tells the Almighty that the travelers need his assistance, and so he puts G-d on hold, while he offers the strangers proper hospitality.

We derive an important lesson from this action, and the Talmud supports it:

"Welcoming a guest can take priority over welcoming the Shechinah."

Furthermore, Rabbi Yochanan teaches us that, "One is permitted to move heavy bundles on Shabbat in order to make room for guests."

Where else can we find similar teachings?

In Hebrew, Sodom means *Burnt* and Gomorrah means *A Ruined Heap*.

Respectively, these names were given to the two cities after they were destroyed by G-d for their sinfulness. And while many religious fundamentalists use this well-known story to justify their homophobia, some Torah scholars believe that the truly wicked act was the fact that when strangers (in the form of angels) came to visit Abraham's nephew, Lot—these angels were not treated with respect and hospitality by the people of Sodom. As you may recall, the Sodomites demanded access to the strangers, and Lot denied them access. And as the story goes, the Sodomites were struck with blindness, allowing Lot and his family, who were then instructed to leave the city, to escape, while Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed with fire by G-d.

Lot's need to protect the strangers came even before the protection of his own family. What Lot did was act as his culture expected him to. This was the norm. Hospitality, in these times, meant that if a person asked for assistance, you were completely obliged to help and protect your visitor—even if that meant losing

your property, family or life. So, the real Sodom and Gomorrah lesson here is not, "G-d will be displeased if you're LGBTQQI", rather "G-d will reject you if you don't stand up for those among you who are strangers, those who are different—those who may need your help."

The prophets remind us that, "G-d wants you to love those who are outsiders, and protect those who are defenseless."

In order to fully understand the reasoning behind these teachings, we must remember that our people were a nomadic people who traveled and wandered in an often hostile environment. Weather conditions and suspicious neighbors made hospitality a matter of survival. Being welcomed in a stranger's home or tent could mean the difference between life and death.

Jews have a history filled with kindness to strangers. During Shabbat dinner, aren't we commanded to welcome strangers to join us for a meal?

And we must also remind ourselves that many times in our history, we were strangers ourselves. One such example is the Kaifeng Jews of China. During the so-called "Holy War Crusades" of the 1090s, many Jews living in small towns along the Eastern coast of the Mediterranean and throughout Persia saw their homes burglarized and their synagogues burned down. They were threatened: either convert to Christianity or die.

So, a handful of Jews headed east, down the Silk Road to China because they had heard that the Chinese people had a reputation for kindness and hospitality. It is believed that the original group of settlers included about 70 Jewish families, totaling approximately 500 people. By 1163 c.e., a great synagogue was built, where it remained standing for over 700 years. During the Ming Dynasty, which lasted until about 1644, the Kaifeng Jewry reached its peak with a population of about 5000. Clearly, their survival depended upon the kindness of Chinese strangers.

One only has to remember the events of September 11th to realize that the kindness of strangers can often determine who lives and who dies. Many average and ordinary people became heroes in the days that followed. After the devastating Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, there were families around the country who opened their homes to complete strangers. Shortly after the hurricane, I remember hearing about Web postings by kind-hearted individuals who invited strangers to live with them, asking for nothing in return.

As we reflect upon the past year and as we take inventory of each moment, let's ask ourselves—what have we done to help the stranger? How have we helped another human being survive in this world?

If we examine the survival of modern Jews, don't many of us depend upon the kindness of strangers? The hostile desert environment that early Jews faced has

been replaced with other hostilities: perhaps its discrimination in the workplace, or unfair housing, or perhaps unequal marriage laws.

And who exactly are the strangers of today? Who were the strangers 10 years ago? A hundred years ago?

As many of you know, Congregation Sha'ar Zahav was formed to welcome a new "type" of stranger in 1977. Lesbian and gay Jews found a home here. Since then, this congregation has continued a tradition of welcoming strangers from all walks of life. We were once considered "progressive" to acknowledge bisexual and transgender people. Today, it's a common thing at Sha'ar Zahav. Even the term sexual minority has evolved with the growing understanding of intersex, two-spirit, and genderqueer people.

In the mid-1990s, many Sha'ar Zahav members marched in support of immigrants' rights when the Governor supported a state proposition that would deny access to healthcare to the undocumented—many of whom were children. More recently, CSZ members stood in solidarity with other religious communities like the San Francisco Organizing Project (SFOP) to support access to universal healthcare.

I considered myself a stranger in that place that my parents called the Richmond District. Aren't we all strangers at some time or another? Aren't we all guests at one time?

I am reminded of a December night three years ago when I first stepped into this sanctuary. I very much felt like a stranger—not only because I am Filipino, but also because I was in the process of converting to Judaism.

Early rabbinic interpreters believe that the word, “ger” did not only mean stranger. They tell us that the word also can be interpreted as “convert.” G-d so loves the stranger that Abraham's circumcision was postponed until Abraham was ninety years-old so that future Jewish converts would know that one can be a Jew at any age.

So, when I walked into this sanctuary for the first time, I really had no idea how I would be received. I wondered if I would meet other Filipinos, other Asian/Pacific Islanders, and other people of color.

I did, of course. In fact, I met a wide variety of people at Sha'ar Zahav—different people with unique philosophies, political beliefs, and traditions, but who still have much in common. One of those common values is “tikkun olam,” repairing the world.

Tikkun olam is central to Reform Judaism—and to the Zohar, the most important book in kabbalah. It's the obligation to repair the world in the kingdom of G-d. It's what we pray every time we say the Aleinu. And don't we repair the world by welcoming strangers? We do this by taking in the widow for example, or the orphan, or the homeless—and caring for them.

As we take inventory of our actions during the past year, let us also reflect upon all of the times when we welcomed and cared for a stranger. As we embrace the New Year, let us also remember to embrace the stranger. How exactly can we do this? How can you embrace the stranger?

Some of the ways in which you can do this is by getting involved in activities and organizations that may seem “foreign” to you. For some, it may mean volunteering at the Transgender Law Center to challenge your gender paradigms and to gain a broader perspective on issues concerning transgender equality. For others, it may mean supporting the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights in order to gain insight into the challenges of being an immigrant. It may mean taking a stroll at today's Folsom Street Faire to expand your understanding about the leather community.

One group that I support is LGBT seniors, so I attend monthly meetings with the San Francisco “Prime Timers” and the “Lavender seniors of the East Bay.” There are many groups out there that need our help.

Earlier, I spoke of the Kaifeng Jews. I encourage you to visit the Jewish library this Fall because there will be an entire program on Asian Jews and Jews living in Asia. One of our members, Rose Katz was instrumental in bringing the Kaifeng photo exhibit to the San Francisco Jewish library for all of us to enjoy and learn. So, let's take this time to educate ourselves for the new year.

Together, let us continue our Jewish tradition of welcoming the gay man, the lesbian, the bisexual, the transgender, the gender queer, the straight person, the two-spirit, the single parent, the intersex, the child, the widow, the orphan, the poor, the oppressed, and everyone in between.

May your new year be sweet, and may it be filled with the kindness and sweetness of strangers.