

For You Know the Heart of the Stranger

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Mount Zion Temple

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Shannah Tovah. I hope you are/will all having a meaningful day and an easy fast. Rabbi Spilker mentioned on Rosh Hashanah that we have been a “survey starved” congregation, so in the best interest of Mount Zion, I have a little survey I’d like to take with you this morning, if you’ll indulge me.

If you grew up in another country, please raise your hand. Keep your hands up. If you grew up in another state, please raise your hand. If you grew up in a different neighborhood than where you live now please raise your hand. If you were not raised at Mount Zion, please raise your hand.

I can see there are still some of you left. If you have ever started a new school or a new job, or gone shopping at a new mall, please raise your hand. Okay. Everybody look around. *Now* put your hands down.

If you had your hand up, then you can relate to the words from Exodus: *“You shall not oppress the stranger, for you know the heart of the stranger.”*¹ The verse goes on to remind us that we know the heart of the stranger *because we were strangers in the land of Egypt*. But really, we have all been strangers in much more **recent** memory. I invite you to get in touch with your “inner stranger.”

We have all been strangers in one way or another. We have all experienced that uncomfortable, if exciting feeling of being new in a strange place. We have all had butterflies in our stomachs as we tried to figure out the rules, to decipher the code, to fit in. We have all needed to ask directions in a place we feel we should belong; we have all been outsiders hoping to be let into the inner circle. We have all felt lonely and afraid.

Yes, we know the heart of the stranger. Hopefully, most of us were lucky enough to have our fears calmed, help offered, information shared by hospitable people in the new place. Hopefully most of us felt welcomed by the old-timers, and in time we became one of them.

¹ Exodus 23:9

You may have noticed that at services Rabbi Spilker and I often encourage you to seek out someone you don't know and introduce yourselves. Our goal has been to fulfill our vision of being a welcoming community. We are serious about that here. We truly want every person who enters our doors as a stranger to feel they can leave as a friend. It is no accident that "Welcoming" is the first word of our Temple vision. We have made it a top priority year after year when our thematic focus is "Panim el Panim" engaging with one another "face to face."

It is not just that we **want** to establish a welcoming culture around here. It is our mandate as a Jewish spiritual home. The Torah exhorts us repeatedly: *You shall not wrong the stranger...you shall not oppress the stranger...Love the stranger...Why?* Because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. Because we know how it feels. We know what the stranger needs.

We know, that is, **if** we remember. Perhaps the one commandment that is even more emphatic than "love the stranger" is to remember where we came from. God reminds us right at the beginning of the 10 commandments: "I am Adonai your God, who led you out of the land of Egypt; out of the house of bondage."² It is in the Kiddush we recite every Shabbat. It is the main theme of Passover. **Remember how it feels.**

Memory is a strange thing to command: Regulating behavior makes sense, but here the Torah is legislating a thought. Perhaps it is against human nature to remember - especially the painful things - and God wants us to resist that very real urge to forget. It is more comfortable to forget the humble beginnings, the hard times, the suffering. It is more comfortable to focus on success and prosperity, and to look forward to even better times.

Let's do that for just a moment – revel in the successes for a bit. Despite the recent rise in antisemitism, America still has the wealthiest, most powerful, most numerous, and most secure Jewish community in history. We have much to be proud of and much to celebrate. We here at Mount Zion are so blessed. Every day I feel fortunate to be part of a wonderful leadership team, supported by a fabulous staff. Look around at the beautiful space we have to worship in and the warm, committed, creative people we worship with.

² Exodus 20:2

Our Summit Avenue address is testimony that we Jews have made it here in the Twin Cities. We can live and work and play wherever we want, we have 20 synagogues representing broad Jewish religious diversity, 2 thriving JCC's, 2 Jewish day schools, 2 Federations, Sholom Community Alliance, Hodroff-Epstein Funeral home, Jewish Theater and a thriving Jewish arts community, a Jewish Newspaper, and an alphabet soup of Jewish social justice, communal and special interest organizations.

And we also have much to remember. The first group of Jewish refugees to arrive at the shores of New Amsterdam in 1654 were almost turned away by Peter Stuyvesant. In the 1930's our shores were closed to Jewish refugees fleeing Hitler's Europe. We have been subject to anti-Semitism, intimidation, and slander. We have been refused jobs and been excluded from universities. We have had crosses burned on our lawns.

Not so long ago, The Twin cities were among the most anti-Semitic towns in America. In Minneapolis, Jewish doctors had to open their own hospital because they were not allowed to practice in the existing hospitals. There is a synagogue in Virginia, Minnesota because a hundred years ago, we were not welcome in the Twin Cities so Jews who came to Minnesota looking for a better life had to go north to the Iron Range. Even as accepted and integrated as we are now, we still feel the pain when teachers, coaches, or employers schedule important events, projects, or marathons during our High Holy Days. My point is that even though we are very comfortable now or perhaps **because** we are so, it is important to remember where we came from and how we got here.

I'd like to share with you an excerpt from the Autobiography of Jacob Dobrofsky - my grandfather, may his memory be a blessing. This is how he remembered his journey from the old country in 1898.

Chapter 2
1897 – 1903

Those were perilous times for the Jewish people all over Russia. There were many Pogromen all over the country and conditions were becoming more and more critical all the time... One day there was much excitement because we received a letter from our Uncle David in England. That Friday night, after Shabbes dinner,

Father called us all in and told us that he had decided to go to England and see what it looks like, and if he could get settled there, he would send for us...I have always thought what a lucky break it was for all of us that Father made that decision when he did. Otherwise, there probably would not be any of us here right now.

As soon as the initial excitement and surprise of Father's announcement wore off, the complications began to pile up...Father was not eligible to get a government passport or permission to leave Russia...The only thing left to do was to try to cross the frontiers through illegal agents...The agents charged terrific prices, not only because of the risk involved, but because they knew the frightened Jews had no alternative and would pay whatever price was asked. It was very dangerous, and many lives were lost in the attempts.

Father left for England in March of 1897, and we left about September of 1898... Though the preparations for the trip were difficult and complicated, I was devoured with excitement and eagerness. We had to go almost all the way across Russia to get to the place where we would take the boat, and then after several days on the boat we landed in Libau, and took a boat from there to England. In those days the boats were mostly combined freight and passenger ships, and I guess our boat was mostly for freight...there was even livestock aboard. The food was very very poor, but as it turned out, that was no problem...,every one of us got sick a half hour after we got on the boat, and I don't remember seeing anything until about the day we landed. The Black Sea was very rough and the boat we were on was very small. Many is the time that I wished we had never started the whole thing.

My first reaction to the sights of London was that it scared me, like being on a different planet, surrounded by strange looking people the likes of which I had never seen before. The great, tall buildings, the tramways rushing so fast and the brightly lit streets all astonished me. And the people were so different from the Russian people that I was tongue tied with wonder.

I'm guessing that many of your parents, grandparents, or great grandparents could tell a similar story, or some a far more harrowing story. And, of course there are those of our relatives who never even made it. So, we remember that we were strangers. We remember so that we can fulfill Exodus's commandment

not to wrong or oppress the stranger. So that we can go a step further and fulfill Deuteronomy's commandment to *love* the stranger.³ We repeat weekly in our Shabbat liturgy, that welcoming the stranger is an "obligation without measure, whose reward too is without measure". The most repeated of any commandment, it is echoed 36 times in the Torah.

Like remembering, welcoming often does not come naturally to us. The word, "stranger" is telling: The dictionary defines it as "one who is neither friend nor acquaintance; a foreigner, newcomer, or outsider."⁴ When we hear the word, stranger, we also hear **strange**. Stranger implies someone to be wary of. We are taught from the time we can talk **not to** talk to strangers. We teach our children about Stranger Danger. "Outsider" implies someone who is 'other'- who is not like me, and whom I may not like. "Foreigner" is someone who will **never** be like me.

So how can we fulfill this commandment to welcome, even to love the stranger? We can start by changing our language, and think of welcoming the **newcomer** rather than the stranger. It might make it seem just a little easier, and certainly friendlier. Even better would be to turn that person into an acquaintance or even a friend.

There's a Hassidic story about a rabbi who asked his students, "How do you know when the night has passed and the day is on its way back?" The first student answered, "Could it be when you can look at an animal in the distance and tell if it is a goat or a sheep?" "No," answered the rabbi. Another student thought that perhaps it was when you could look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it was a fig tree or an apple tree, but that also was not right. "When is it then?" the students demanded. "It is when you look on the face of any person and see a friend. Until you can do this, then no matter what time it is it will always be night."

When you can look on the face of any person and can see a friend. Mount Zion Temple has a long history of welcoming newcomers. In his book on our first 100 years, Rabbi Plaut describes what happened when 200 refugees arrived in St. Paul on a Shabbat eve in July of 1882. *"Immediately, the men and*

³ Deuteronomy 10:19 "Love the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

⁴ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/stranger>

women of Mount Zion came to their aid, delivering food and raising funds to help them settle in their new American home.”

A few years later the women of Mount Zion founded Neighborhood House to offer an environment where the immigrants’ culture, language and customs were embraced, even as they were helped to become contributing members of their new community. Eventually Neighborhood House was deeded to the city of Saint Paul, but Mount Zion still maintains active involvement on the board and as volunteers.

In the early 80’s we sponsored 4 Southeast Asian refugee families. In the 90’s we established a New Americans committee.

Every summer we offer our home to homeless families seeking refuge from the street. Then too, we make it a priority to really make our guests feel welcome, to feel – as best as possible under the worst circumstances – at home.

As Rabbi Spilker mentioned on Rosh Hashanah, Mount Zion has signed on to the URJ’s Brit Olam - Covenant with the World - which calls on us to defend the rights of immigrants at risk of deportation.⁵ Last year we joined the HIAS Welcome Campaign, making a commitment to do refugee and immigrant justice work. HIAS was founded in 1881 as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society to assist Jews fleeing pogroms, and today serves refugees worldwide. “Once we helped refugees because they were Jewish. Today we help refugees because we are Jewish.”⁶

Our Tzedek Committee has been working diligently on the question of how Mount Zion will fulfill our commitment to immigrant justice. After months of research and study of the issues, they hosted two open meetings for the congregation. 97% of those attending supported Mount Zion officially becoming an Immigrant Justice congregation, and 67% supported investigating the feasibility of becoming a Sanctuary Congregation ready to house an individual or family at risk of deportation. Earlier this week our Tzedek chairs presented a carefully drafted resolution to our Executive Committee. In a few weeks, it will go to the board.

⁵ https://rac.org/sites/default/files/Brit%20Olam-Sept-2017_0.pdf

⁶ <https://www.hias.org/welcome-campaign-congregations>

Congregational bylaws and a commitment to process, mean that Resolutions like this take time to vet, approve, and enact. It will be a month or two before you see a Congregational statement and action plan. But, as the URJ's Religious Action Center says, we are called to respond to the Urgency of Now.⁷ As individuals we certainly can do that, and as Jews, we must.

Yom Kippur is a time to take an accounting of our souls' deepest recesses. Right now think about "The Stranger." Ask yourself: Who is it that I think of as "other" - that I shrink from when I see them on the street, or feel uncomfortable engaging with? Is it someone with a different color skin? Is it a woman wearing a Hijab or a burka? A man in a hoodie and sagging jeans? Is it someone whose gender isn't binary? Someone who is older or younger than me or someone with a disability? Someone from a different socio-economic class or political party? What would it take for the day to dawn and enable me to look at them and see a friend?

Right now, as individuals, we can make an effort to learn more about the people in this country living with the risk of deportation - There are good resources at the URJ and HIAS websites. Right now, we can have conversations with one another about immigrant justice, and most importantly, listen carefully to one another. You are invited can attend the board meeting on October 10 and be part of the discussion.

In our Haftarah this morning Isaiah reminds us:

*If you remove the chains of oppression,
the menacing hand, the malicious word;
If you make sacrifices for the hungry
And satisfy the needs of the afflicted;
Then shall your light shine in the darkness,
And your night become bright as noon.⁸*

This afternoon we will read from the Torah:

⁷ <https://rac.org/urgency-now-resource-center>

⁸ Isaiah 58:9-10

*When strangers live with you in your land,
You must not oppress them.
The strangers who live with you
Shall be to you like citizens,
And you shall love them as yourself,
For you were strangers in the land of Egypt.⁹*

So on this Yom Kippur day, when our stomachs are empty, and our hearts are full, I issue a two-fold challenge. In the coming year, let us commit to fulfilling our sacred obligation, and realizing our vision as a welcoming and vibrant Jewish spiritual home in **two** ways:

First, here in our Mount Zion community, I challenge you - and myself as well – to greet someone you don't know at **every** service, at **every** program or gathering you attend. Even if they are not newcomers, it will strengthen our community, and you just might brighten their day. If they are newcomers, reach out to them, take them under your wing and help them to feel they belong.

Second, in our Saint Paul community, I challenge you - and myself as well – to make a commitment to learn about Immigrant Justice, and to participate in the Immigrant Justice initiatives that the Tzedek committee is developing. I assure you, there will be a wide variety of ways to become involved - ways that can take advantage of every individual's particular strengths, gifts, or wisdom. If we can meet these two challenges in the coming year, our light surely will shine in the darkness. I will close with a poem that came to me when I realized just who the people are that need our help.

I remember learning about the Pilgrims
in school
Black hats, white collars
Big buckle on their shoes.
They came on boats. I learned
From a faraway land.
My people came on boats too.
In steerage
Like cattle. I remember the smell.

⁹ Leviticus 19:33

We all live here now
Together
Your people, my people, boat people
Yearning to breathe free.
Welcome.
