

**REMARKS FOR DEMONSTRATION AT WEST HARTFORD TOWN HALL
February 1, 2017**

V'ahavtem et hager ki gerim hayyitem

“You shall love the migrant, for you were migrants!” – Deuteronomy 10:19

In the Hebrew Bible, there is one commandment which is found more than any other – some 26 times - and that is the commandment to protect, to care for, to love the *ger*. The Hebrew word *ger* can be translated in a variety of ways: stranger, alien, non-citizen, refugee, migrant.

Why does the Bible insist on this so strongly? Because, for human beings, protecting and loving the *ger* doesn't always come naturally. We are suspicious, even afraid, of those who look different, who hold different beliefs or hail from different places. From ancient times to our own day, we need to be encouraged – commanded! - to reach out, to meet, to protect and care for one another.

And why is welcoming the *ger* such an important principle? Because if you are a stranger, a newcomer, a migrant, a refugee, you are vulnerable; you are not back home where you know the lay of the land, where you have family and friends to support you, where the culture, the expectations, the language are all so familiar.

But this is not just a principle which undergirds Judaism and many other faiths: it is a treasured principle upon which our nation is based. We are a nation of immigrants. This has been one of our greatest strengths. My grandparents came here from Germany, Ukraine and Russia and none of our family members who stayed behind in Europe survived the Holocaust. People have come to America from all over the world fleeing persecution, searching for freedom, seeking opportunity and the chance to build better lives for their children.

We Americans close our doors to the rest of the world at our own peril. Whenever we have shut the door to immigrants, or singled out religious or national groups to ban from our shores or imprison – as we have from time to time – we have incurred a moral stain and paid a serious price.

My teacher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, marched with Rev. Dr. MLK at Selma. Asked later what it felt like to walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge facing phalanx of police officers armed with clubs and guns, he replied: “I felt as if my legs were praying.” “I felt as if my legs were praying.”

Today, if he were still alive, Rabbi Heschel would be praying with his legs at gatherings like these. He would be speaking out for our Muslim brothers and sisters, who are being targeted now. And he would caution us to take strength from one another, to join hands and hearts and not to give in. He used to tell his young daughter, Susannah: “Never despair; it is a sin to despair.”

He wrote: “Surrender to despair is surrender to evil. It is important to feel anxiety; it is sinful to wallow in despair. What we need is a total mobilization of the heart, intelligence and wealth for the purpose of love and justice.”

Let us mobilize! Evil, he wrote, is never the climax of history. This will be defeated!

Shalom! Salaam! Peace!