

WELCOMING THE STRANGER

(Adapted from remarks delivered by Rabbi Cantor 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

The Hebrew word *ger* may be translated in a variety of ways: stranger, alien, non-citizen, refugee, migrant. According to the Talmudic Sage Rabbi Eliezer (see Baba Metzia 59b), the Torah “warns against the wronging of a *ger* in thirty-six places; other say, in forty-six places.” Indeed, the duty to protect, care for and love the *ger* is found more frequently than any other commandment in the Hebrew Bible.

Why the repeated emphasis on this mitzvah? 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 extend ourselves, to meet, protect and care for one another.

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. You are at the mercy of others, and there will always be people who are eager to take advantage of you.

But this is not just a principle which undergirds Judaism and many other faiths: it is one of the treasured principles 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, including 75 years ago when Japanese citizens were interred during WW II – we have incurred a moral stain and paid a serious price. My teacher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, marched with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King at Selma. Asked later what it felt like to walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge facing a 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 this. 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. Rabbi Heschel 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. Evil is never the climax of history.”

Since January 27, every single Jewish movement, along with many major Jewish organizations, has issued a statement regarding refugees and the targeting of Muslims. The statement from our own Conservative movement declared that “it is a betrayal of Jewish history and our own Jewish values to stand quiet as victims of war and terror are left helpless – especially on the basis of religion. Most importantly, the Conservative Movement completely rejects the targeting of individuals based on their religion. As Jews, it is an affront to our fundamental values. We are all enriched by the diverse set of experiences that immigrants bring to our society.... To do otherwise, betrays the Jewish values we find deeply engrained in our faith and history.”

If you care about this as deeply as I do, I urge you to support the critical work being done by HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (www.hias.org). Founded in 1881, HIAS is still working tirelessly to fulfill its mission: “Welcome the stranger; protect the refugee.”

Take care,
Rabbi Debra Cantor