

D'var Torah on Achrei-Mot Kedoshim  
Maytal Saltiel  
April 28, 2018

Shabbat Shalom.

Here we stand three weeks from the end of Passover... two weeks after Yom Hashoah... The Exodus and the Shoah are two moments when we as a Jewish community have known what it is to feel like to be strangers. Known what it feels like to feel out of place, nostalgic for home, just trying to survive day by day, praying that our children and grandchildren will have an easier life free from persecution and full of promise. In our parsha today, in the midst of a long list of rules and regulations we are instructed once again to care for the *ger* or the stranger foreigner in our midst – “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the LORD am your God.”

Today I want to tell you the story of Joshua... a *ger*, an undocumented immigrant, fleeing persecution, coming to the US in search for a better life. He was born on a farm and apprenticed as a tailor before war broke out. He was forced to leave his parents and grandparents with his older brother, all of whom ended up murdered, he escaped conscription into the ruler's army and hid in the woods for the remainder of the war. Joshua survived by living off of what he could find in the forest. Once he escaped death by playing dead, the soldier, just to make sure, slammed the butt of his rifle into Joshua's head fracturing his skull, but he didn't even flinch. After the war Joshua started a bakery with the one cousin he had left before he found his way to New York.

G-d commands us to not oppress a *ger* 36 times throughout the Torah, in gematria 36 is double chai or double life. When we save the life of a stranger we save two lives, theirs and our own. We were strangers in the land of Egypt, we know the experience of being a *ger*, somebody stuck in limbo who is not able to return home but has also not been welcomed entirely into the community and given full citizenship. A *ger* must live with feet in multiple worlds, in a sense of liminality

and unease. Ger is related to the word *gur* meaning fear – a *ger* is often someone fearing for his or her life – a stranger, an immigrant.

The very first Jew in the Torah was an immigrant – Abraham went from the land of Ur to found a nation. He left his homeland at G-d's command, became a stranger with dreams for his family and his people. Judaism started as and continues to be a people of immigrants, a people dreaming of a better future. It was the Egyptians who called us *ivrim*, which has a connotation of being transgressive. We were border crossers, we were illegals. We crossed the desert, the wilderness, we started again and again in new lands, we escaped inquisition and genocide, we know in our bones what it feels like to be the stranger and we continue to tell the story *dor v'dor*, from generation to generation.

Joshua, the undocumented immigrant in my story, was my Zayde, Yeshua Areyeh, the man my son Ari is named after – the tailor, holocaust survivor, pious man who survived until 104 through some combination of his stubbornness, loyalty and love. Zayde was undocumented, or to be more precise he was misdocumented. All of his family was murdered during the Holocaust with the exception of that one cousin, Murray. Murray had also lost much of his family. But happened to have other cousins in America who he hadn't seen since he was a boy. These American cousins sponsored Murray and his brother Louis to come to America, gave them an opportunity to start over. The thing was Louis had been murdered in a concentration camp, but the cousins didn't know that and my Zayde, took over his identity, becoming Louis Zoberman. This was a secret he held close... it was only told to me long after the people who had sponsored him had passed away. This was a secret that before today less than a dozen people in the world knew, a secret that shaped his life daily in fear of being caught and deported.

My Zayde was an undocumented immigrant, maybe your Bubbe or Zayde or parents were as well, this is something I find myself coming back to again and again as I think about the situations of so many people and families living in our community today. I hear about the stories of fathers being separated from their families, being taken into detention for years after what they thought would be a typical check-in with Immigration. Stories of families struggling to make ends meet because their mother, the only breadwinner in the house, was deported.

Stories of families having to make the difficult decision of where their young American children would go if one parent was detained, would they stay in the United States, the only land they know, or return with their parents to somewhere they may have never seen before. Facing imminent deportation would they decide to make the difficult decision to go into sanctuary, hoping and praying that a little more time would help their immigration case.... In each of these stories I wonder about my own family. If Zayde had been caught and deported I certainly would not be here today.

When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I the Lord am your G-d. – We are commanded to love the stranger, the foreigner as ourselves. Love, not just respect or tolerate, but to love.

Nechama Leibowitz the biblical scholar teaches that if we were to take the phrase “as yourself” to only indicate the extent and intensity of the love we should show then it doesn’t matter that we were strangers in Egypt, it does not add motivation. But if we take “as yourself” to imply someone who is like you, who stands in need of your help, then being strangers in Egypt is important. You once shared his predicament and thus know what it feels like to be discriminated against and helpless, when you were strangers. Love your neighbor, then, who is human being, just like yourself.

Love is not just an emotion but a call to action, it requires action of us. We are to love the stranger as ourselves for we were strangers in the land of Egypt. We know what it feels like to be the foreigner, but we also know what it means to care for a stranger. We, especially here at BEKI, know what it means to offer radical hospitality. To help people feel comfortable here, to care for people, feed people, walk with people in the high and low moments of their lives. As someone once told me, the first time you walk into BEKI you experience a love bomb.

BEKI has been approached by the New Sanctuary Movement to consider becoming part of the movement, to consider offering sanctuary to an individual here in our synagogue or providing assistance to people living in sanctuary in

another house of worship. People enter sanctuary for a number of reasons and every story is unique. Sanctuary congregations cannot provide permanent housing and security, but can offer protection until the immigrant can receive a fair legal hearing. In some cases, sanctuary buys time for the person to seek a deferment or another resolution that will allow them to stay with their family and in this country. Sometimes it is the public attention itself that opens up new legal possibilities. I know this is not an easy decision, there are many factors to consider as a congregation, but I invite you to join in this important conversation. I have been part of a small exploratory committee learning about what it means to be part of the sanctuary movement and we are hosting a Shabbat Schmooze on May 12<sup>th</sup> after Kiddush on the New Sanctuary Movement and the Role of Faith Communities with experts from New Haven. As of June 2017, over 800 faith communities have declared themselves part of the New Sanctuary Movement, I hope that we too can consider taking this pledge to love the stranger as ourselves. This is an opportunity to take what G-d teaches us again and again and put it into practice. Every Passover we say enter all who are hungry, let them come and eat... this year we can make this offer a reality. Can we practice radical hospitality, welcoming in not only the metaphorical stranger but literal strangers as Abraham did, help them to become one of us... part of our community – and treat them as G-d commands, like one of our citizens, love them as ourselves, and through this act embody love for G-d.

I wonder how much less fear my Zayde would have had his entire life if he knew there were people around the country that would stand with him, a congregation of strangers, even if they weren't Jews, that would love him and support him because G-d told them to.

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