Ger V'Toshav/Resident Aliens – The Wisdom of the Oxymoron

Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

Chaya Sarah

August 10, 2019

I am an American Citizen living in Vancouver, British Columbia and serving a Canadian Reform Congregation for the past six years. This juxtaposition of two increasingly disparate identities has given me a unique perspective on this week's parasha, Chaya Sarah and its introduction of the term *ger toshav*/resident alien.

In this week's parasha we read the rather peculiar line, "Ger v'toshav anochi im-chem… / I am a resident alien among you, sell me a burial site that I may bury my wife." (Gen 23:4) spoken by Abraham as he petitions the owner of a field for the right to purchase land for the gravesite for his wife Sarah.

To both the student of Torah and the student of the English language this phrase *Ger v'toshav* / Resident Alien, peeks the ears and draws attention. It is an example of one of those delightful and often poignant turns of a phrase in any language, an *oxymoron.* The bringing together of two seemingly incompatible and opposite terms; like "Sweet Sorrow", "Recorded Live", "Act Naturally", "Good Grief", "Passive Aggressive", and though not kosher still illustrative "Jumbo Shrimp". I have always enjoyed how language can construct through the use of this literary device biting commentary on the incongruity of frequently paired things.

But it is that commentary, that moment of silence that hovers over a room when we contemplate the meaning of an oxymoron, when we dwell on the underlining message of *ger v'toshav* / resident alien that these phrases so

powerful. The oxymoron challenges us to see compatibility, even harmony in seemingly incompatible things.

So, what is a *ger v'toshav* / a resident alien? In our Torah portion and in all Jewish legal texts that followed a *ger v'toshav* was an individual of special status in the community, one who lived permanently among the citizens of a place but did not have the status of a citizen. A *ger toshav* enjoyed all of the protections that society offered its citizens but was exempt by virtue of his (it was not gender inclusive back then) special status from many of the requirements of citizenship. A *ger toshav* was a protected visitor and honoured guest in a society. Central to this was the public obligation for the health and welfare of a *ger toshav*. This was the sacred responsibility of each citizen in that society and the society as a whole.

Jewish law is emphatic about our responsibility to the stranger who lives within our midst. Thirty-six times in Torah we are commanded to "Love the Stranger". Every year at Passover it serves as the narrative thread of the seder. At the very center of the Torah in the Holiness Code we read, "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" (Lev.19:34).

In this weeks parsha the emissary of Judaism to the world, the individual on account of whose merit and relationship with God, above all others, we were given the Torah is presented not as a powerful, wealthy businessman, not as a man who regularly talks with God, but as a helpless stranger in a land that he now calls home seeking aid and assistance from its citizenship. The text is both

graphic and poignant, his dead wife literally lays at his feet, he owns nothing in this land, and he asks for a place to be sold to him so he may bury her. It's not a handout he seeks, he is willing to pay a fair price for the land, but he wants permission to do so. And the Hittites who owned the land, they sell a burial plot to him, breaking with tradition, even breaking the law against allowing aliens, even resident aliens from owning land. They sell him the land because they see themselves in his shoes, they imagine their own dead lying at their feet with no one offering to help and they make a new law, and they help.

We can hear the echo of this story in our own times, at borders north and south, east and west of wherever we are. How do you treat the stranger that shows up in your land? Are they criminal for being there, to be feared, incarcerated, ostracized or are they to be treated with empathy like the Hittites offered to our forefather Abraham in his hour of great sorrow and despair?

When we are reminded of the kindness shown our ancestors, when we are reminded that it was also a kindness shown us, because we too were once strangers in the land then the solution Judaism demands is obvious no matter the challenges, no matter the laws that need to be re-written. We must care for those who cross freeways, deserts, oceans and mountain ranges to get here, just as (or better than) our nation(s) cared for our parents and grandparents they were running for their lives. We must reach out to the stranger in our midst, to the resident alien, those who live and work here, but whom the system, economic, social, medical and education do not have a place for, Torah commands us; make a place.

As is our tradition, when Abraham buried Sarah he placed a stone on her grave as a sign to all who would see it. A sign with, its own double meaning, like an oxymoron. The stone signified that beneath this ground lied Sarah the wife of Abraham the mother of Isaac, but is also said this ground, this portion belonged to Abraham, a resident alien in the land of the Hittites who was sold this land though he had no legal claim to it. The stone is a sign for all times, a symbol of the kindness and responsibility shown by the Hittites to the *ger toshav* the resident aliens, the strangers in their land and of the universality of human life.

We all mourn our dead, every life has meaning, even if they speak a different language than ours, come from a different country, are members of a different tribe. When we fail to act to heed this mitzvah our Torah is *'Clearly misunderstood'*.