Ger V'Toshav
Resident Aliens

What does this sign mean? (Hold up Exit sign) Yes it means exit, the way out is over here. The sign is an important sign, we have laws that state these must be clearly visible, they must be lighted, they must be accessible to all individuals. The lawyers in the room will see this sign and be reminded perhaps of the Supreme Court ruling limiting free speech to not shouting fire in a crowded theater for the danger of the whole auditorium rushing to the doors clearly marked under these signs. On an airplane or a school bus these signs are marked with the word emergency, reminding us that our ability to operate them, and to get out in a hurry may save our life.

What about this sign? (Yield) It reminds us that we don't have the right of way here, our needs do not come before the needs of others, we must restrain our own desires so that others may proceed. If we don't then we endanger our life and the lives of those in our community. The Yield sign says, "Hey wait a minute, be responsible about what you are about to do, the responsibility is on you to make this crossing, this interchange safe, you must look out for others because they are not in a position to look out for you.

The Yield sign marks a way in, and the Exit sign a way out but both signs signal above all else responsibility and consideration for others. You can't block an exit, a Yield sign is not a suggestion. These signs say, put your self second and the needs of the community first.

It struck me then as a powerful message when on our recent weekend getaway to San Diego, Kim and I noticed these signs along the freeway. (Hold up immigrant signs) What do these signs say, what message of responsibility for our community above our self do these signs project. Their message is a bit more ambiguities than that of the Exit

or Yield. To some these signs remind them of the hope that America has to offer the world, a land so rich in resources and opportunity that people will risk their lives to get in. To others the signs signal the greatest threat to our state and national economy, a human wave sweeping up our shores flooding our social services, our school system our work force. The sign definitely says caution, but caution from what? Reasonable people could argue and disagree on this issue.

This week the whole of the Jewish world reads the story of the death of our matriarch Sarah, and of her husband Abraham's attempt to secure for her a proper burial place. In the text we read a rather peculiar line, a phrase that has as much double meaning as the sign of an immigrant family rushing across a busy freeway. We read as Abraham petitions the owner of a field for the right to purchase some land for a gravesite for his wife, Abraham says, "*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)

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. Now before you all rush home to your Email accounts and start sending me lists of oxymorons, let me save you the trouble, "Military Intelligence", "Sweet Sorrow", "Recorded Live", "Act Naturally", "Good Grief", "Passive Aggressive", "Jumbo Shrimp", and for those Apple Computer enthusiasts among us, "Microsoft Works." The list is long and entertaining of how language, and in this case the English language can construct through the use of this literary device biting commentary on everything from our national defense to the captains of industry.

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. It is that moment of second thought and reflection that we have as we slow from 80 miles and hour to 55 as we race by the silhouetted portrait of a family, any family, risking life and limb to gain entry into our country. It is that moment of contemplation that makes these signs and phrases so powerful, as if to say, hey wait a minute their is a truth in this that I need to think about, that I need to come to grips with.

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 special status from many of the requirements of citizenship. A *ger toshav* was a protected visitor and honored guest in a society, and most of all the health and welfare of a *ger toshav* was the sacred responsibility of each citizen in that society. Why? Why is Jewish law so clear on this, so clear on our responsibility tot he stranger who lives within our midst, because of the biblical reminder that we read every year a Passover, that Abraham himself manifests in this Parsha, "Because you were once strangers in the land as well, you must be welcoming to the stranger among you."

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. Its 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 alien's 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 state, in our nation with its unresolved conflict over social services and education given to our own resident aliens, the strangers in our midst. 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 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 to get here, just as we care for those who cross oceans, just as our nation cared for our parents and grandparents when we our nation was not so prosperous, when we were not so enlightened. 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, we must 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. As sign with again, its own double meaning. 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, so that it would be a sign for all times a symbol of the kindness and responsibility shown by the Hittites to the *ger toshav* the resident aliens, the stangers in their land.