WELCOMING THE STRANGER
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Temple Sholom, Vancouver BC
June 10, 2017

One City, One Message – churches, mosques and synagogues all preaching on the same verse(s) from Torah –

"The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Leviticus 19:34

We find the roots of this most-frequent commandment, which appears 36 times in the Torah, in the stories about Abraham, the man our tradition considers to be the first Jew. In an effort to help us work with God to create a more just, caring, and compassionate world, God made a covenant with Abraham and all of us who see ourselves as his descendants.

In the covenant, God promised to:

- Protect Abraham
- Give him the progeny he desperately craved
- Make him and his decendants a permanent people, and after 4,000 years, we are still here. That is permanent, is it not, even by European standards?
- Give us that tiny sliver of land in the Middle East that is modern day Israel.

But a covenant is not a unilateral promise. It is a binding agreement.

In exchange for fulfilling God's promises, God charged Abraham – and all of us – with the responsibility to:

- Be a blessing
- Walk in God's ways and live up to God's teachings
- Fill the world and teach Abraham's descendants – again, that is all of us – with tzedakah u'mishpat (righteousness and justice).

With this covenant in place, our tradition offers two stories in which Abraham welcomes strangers into his midst.

In the first, he rushes out into the desert to greet three strangers. After bringing them into his tent, he helped them wash and then served them a delicious meal.

Our Midrashic tradition expands the lesson of this story. We read that Abraham's tent had openings on all four sides so that he would see all who approached from any direction. Once he

spotted anyone approaching, he would rush out into the desert to welcome them in the same way he welcomed the three strangers.

Another legend tells us that as an old man wandered toward Abraham's tent, our forefather, as was his custom, ran out to greet the stranger. He ushered him into his tent, helped him wash, and served him a delicious meal. Once the man finished dining, though, he took an idol out of his sack and began to worship it. Furious that the man would profane his tent with such blasphemy, Abraham screamed at him in rage, before boldly picking the man up and throwing him, his idol, and his sack out into the desert.

Then Abraham heard the voice of God: "Abraham, Abraham! I have put up with that man and his idol worship for 75 years! Could you not have tolerated him for even a single night?" Ashamed, Abraham ran out into the cold desert night, caught up with the man, apologized profusely, and implored him to return to his tent.

These stories remind us that our biblical mandate is clear we must welcome the stranger. Indeed we have to be looking for opportunities to welcome the stranger. Because we know what it is like to be a stranger, because we know what it is like to not be welcome, and because the stranger, once welcomed is no longer a stranger – but one of us, like us, a part of us – a fellow human being, a child of God.

I have spoken many times about how this commandment implores us to act in the face of the Syrian refugee crisis and our work with The Mustafa family and the now the Issa family which will be arriving in just 2 weeks is evidence that you have heard the call, you have said hineni here I am and together we are leading our community in fulfilling this sacred mitzvah.

Tonight I'm not going to use this opportunity of One City, One Message to speak about Refugees. My views on our Jewish imperative to respond with empathy to those running for their lives is well known in this congregation.

Instead tonight I want to use the opportunity of this unified message to talk about how we welcome the non-Jew in our congregation.

On this weekend of interfaith collaboration, lets acknowledge the very real interfaith collaboration that takes place in the homes of our children and grandchildren. The person married to a Jewish spouse, living as a member of our community, helping to raise Jewish children or grandchildren, establishing a Jewish home and supporting our mission as a congregation.

The recent Pew Center Study of the American Jewish Community found an intermarriage rate among non-Orthodox Jews, of 71 percent (58% amongst all Jews), this is up from 43 percent in 1990 and 17 percent in 1970.

Put another way more than 2/3s of non-orthodox Jews who marry are marrying non-Jews.

Intermarriage Is Fact of Jewish Life — Not a Disease. In my lifetime and certainly in our children's lifetime how congregations and communities address the particular needs and aspirations of our intermarried families will be and already is the most critical challenge facing the Jewish people.

The biblical term for the non-Jew living amongst us as one of us is *Ger Toshav*, in modern vocabulary we might call them Righteous Gentiles, a term normally reserved for those non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jewish lives during the Shoah. But one that I think in our present circumstances is also, though certainly not equally, still quite courageous.

It takes courage to raise a child in a faith that you were not yourself raised in.

It takes courage to walk in to this building on a Sunday morning for religious school or a Friday night for Shabbat services and encourage your children to intones words to prayers you do not know or even understand.

It takes courage to attend a Passover seder laden with generations of customs and rituals, let alone to help make one as many of our Geri Toshav do every year.

But lets not only marvel at the courage, lets appreciate what these righteous gentiles are doing to help sustain the Jewish people. That same Pew Study also found that children of intermarriage in the millennial generation are far more likely to identify as Jewish compared to the children of intermarriages in previous generations.

Why is this? The reason is clear to me. Because in previous generations if you married out, you were kicked out. But in some congregations, in many families – we have learned that you cannot build a wall to wall off love – so instead we have built bridges and opened doors, creating quite literally a place in the tent for the non-Jew living amongst our community and our people.

The words "ger toshav" are the ones our Torah and later Talmudic rabbis use for the "stranger who resides with you,". Though the word "ger" comes from another verb that means "reside," and it also means convert. It's obvious to me that what makes this term so attractive and appropriate is (1) it's in Hebrew, which grants Jewish legitimacy to our feelings of warmth toward non-Jews in our community. (2) It places non-Jewish spouses and allies in the middle of some of our most beloved words, the ones, words of Torah, words that give a religious mandate to empathy for others.

Orthodox Rabbi Steven Greenberg writes in his essay "Between Intermarriage and Conversion: Finding a Middle Way", that the concept of Ger Toshav might help Jews engage more productively with intermarried families.

"Instead of focusing our attention on mixed marriages, why not attend instead to the problem of mixed homes?" he writes. "Why not secure the Jewish home by creating a contemporary *ger toshav*--not a convert to Judaism, but a gentile who actively chooses to live among Jews?"

Why not recognize that, celebrate that, even encourage the vital role the *Ger Toshav* plays to safe guard Jewish identity.

Tonight as we are reminded about the importance of the mitzvah to welcome the stranger – a commandment that appears more than any other in the Torah I would like each of us to look at how we in this congregation and at home in our families welcome and embrace those who come to us from a different faith, or no faith at all?

Have we made our home and our congregation like Abraham's tent, open on all sides, a place as our mission statement for our congregation declares, a place that honours and sanctifies each and every person?

The doors to conversion to Judaism are open wide at Temple Sholom, for those that choose to join our people we have created many accessible paths to do so.

But our windows must be open as well. We must continue to embrace the Ger Toshav, to honour those that are a part of us, even if they technically choose to stand outside looking in. There must be a place in the tent and at the table and in the shul for them as well. Not only out of pragmatism, but because our Torah commands us to make one, to be like Abraham, to welcome the stranger – and then one day, Bayom HaHu – God willing they and all of us will be stranger no more.