Chesed and Welcoming the Stranger

You shall not oppress a *stranger* for you know the feelings of the *stranger*, having yourselves been *strangers* in the land of Egypt. Exodus 23:9

When a *stranger* resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him/her. 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. Leviticus 19:33-34

For the Lord your God is God supreme and Lord supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the *stranger*, providing him/her with food and clothing. You too must love the *stranger* for you were *strangers* in the land of Egypt. Deuteronomy 10:17-19

Distribute the texts above *(emphasis added)*

In defining the word stranger, the first dictionary definition is - a person whom one does not know or with whom one is not familiar. Throughout Jewish history we have been strangers. Not only in Egypt and later in the diaspora, but even at the beginning of the Jewish people itself. Indeed, Abraham and Sarah become strangers within their communities and on their sojourns because of their beliefs.

We are instructed to identify with the stranger, to provide security and treat him/her as an equal and to love him/her. God reminds us that because were strangers in the land of Egypt we have personal knowledge of what it feels like to be different, set apart, unique within a community. We know just how vulnerable a person feels in that situation. Therefore, to identify with the stranger and treat him/her with love is an act of *chesed.*

In the 21st century the experience of being a stranger is very close at hand. How many of us have moved in the last 20 years? Playing Jewish geography is very popular precisely because our communities see a steady ebb and flow of members each year. Keeping the experience of being ‘new’ or ‘different’ in the forefront of our consciousness allows us to be welcoming and create communities of *chesed* within our synagogues, our sisterhoods and our neighborhoods.

Questions to ponder:

* How can our language (spoken and written) reflect *chesed* and welcoming to strangers?
* What can our synagogue/sisterhood do within our own communities to provide for the stranger?
* What outreach to different communities within our local area could we explore?

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