



I have been both a stranger and a neighbor. My family left the Soviet Union more than a decade ago after living there for generations. Now I am a stranger living in the Balkans — arguably not the bastion of tolerance and sympathy toward the weak. Here, the most revered national hero is famous for the saying, “I see the world as a field for the cultural contest of people.” More often than not the contest is not reserved for the cultural.

In this place, where might makes right, I am welcome because of my defenselessness — a woman with a backpack and a smile. My “strangerness” is welcome because I am willing to become a neighbor. As a neighbor I bring a vision of a world where life is not as hard, where neighbors resolve most conflicts through words, not guns. What a difference from our life in the Soviet Union where, as neighbors, we faced insults and the systematic discrimination that ultimately forced us to abandon our home.

Living now in Macedonia as it teeters on the brink of war, and seeing longtime neighbors turn on each other, I acknowledge the possibility that oppression may stop the feuds between neighbors who use the banner of “strangerness” — ethnicity — to masquerade the fight for shady economic rights and separatism.

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In Ethiopia where I was born, we were called Falashim, strangers. We believed our home was in Israel, where someday we would live. In 1983 my family journeyed to Sudan. Traveling in the night and faced with disease, hunger, and death, our faith in God sustained us. We journeyed so we would not be strangers in a strange land any longer.

In 1984 our dream became reality. We were rescued to Israel. Now our neighbors were Jews.

But we were still strangers. We had to start from the beginning in everything, just like being born. Sabras looked at us as primitive, hungry, carriers of disease. We were black Jews. The color of our skin, our language, our accent, our customs, our traditions, made us different.

Now, other immigrants are coming to our land. Today, as an Israeli, I want to welcome them, help them feel at home. Maybe I will not like their food. I will surely like my traditions better than theirs. But that does not make us strangers. We are neighbors and I will respect their ways, as I want others to respect mine.

As Jews, we have all been through bad times. We share that, and we share our faith, and our country, Israel. We even share the feelings of the stranger, which makes us one people.

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Which voice is heard? That of an authentic Jew?

The “strangers in our midst.” Yes, looking at invisibility is a way of addressing our blind spots, but can we deal both with the arduous work of integrating the various parts of our egos and questioning the boundaries of what we construct as “our community”?

Some claim to own the place; France’s famous singer Georges Brassens refers to them as “the happy imbeciles who were born somewhere.” Waving the flag of membership leaves out those who might have fallen, as Ibn Ezra says, like “the berry severed from the branch.” The tree of life, though, has such a large trunk that we can only struggle to grasp its circumference.

The strangers are here to stay. *Mir zaynen do!* We are here! They are here! Past, present, and future, in one location: *haMakom*, the (holy) Place, with no escape possible. The stranger, the “other” as Lévinas would recognize her/him to be, has a chance to become human.

Fly! We know the treasure of the ephemeral; we are the *Ivrim*, the Hebrews, those who pass through to the other side to reveal the sparks.

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וגר לא תלחץ ואתם ידעתם את-נפש הגר כי-גרים
הייתם בארץ מצרים שמות כג:ט

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

Toneh, the Hebrew word for “wrong,” is an ancient word that — although not etymologically related — shares a connection to the roots for “poor” and “humble.” These roots teach us that it is not only physical oppression of a foreigner or legal wrong that we must guard against; we must also guard against humiliation and impoverishment. The stranger is someone moving through temporarily; the stranger is not a neighbor.

Why isn’t the word neighbor used? We are told, “love your neighbor.” One expects a certain reciprocity from neighbors. Today I am in need; tomorrow my neighbor will be. Not so the stranger. If he is mistreated, he’ll be moving on soon enough and the ill treatment or denigration will go with him and be lost.

The ethics most vital to promote are those where there is little chance of their violation being discovered. The stranger has no sympathetic cadre of friends or family — no influence. He is expendable.

What about “strangers” in our midst? Prison friends tell me that those outside prison are harshly judgmental. Mentally ill friends say the same thing. The poor, the ugly, the disfigured answer a definition of stranger. Am I about to make my Islamic neighbor a “stranger” as well?

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