



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Achrei Mot-Kedoshim

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April 20, 2013
Achrei Mot-Kedoshim

Are We All Strangers?



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart Enter the Heart"*

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ABSTRACT

All of us were shocked to hear of the tragedy in Boston a few days ago. Two bombs exploding. Bodies torn apart. Three people killed. More than a hundred wounded.

Some of us wept and could not be torn away from the news. Others of us sighed, said "What a terrible world," and moved on.

Were those who wept over-reacting? Were those who didn't callous? What should our response be, when strangers die in a far-away place?

The Torah, in this week's reading, bids us to love the stranger "for you, too, were strangers in Egypt."

Treat strangers with love because you, too, were once strangers. How sensitive ... how forward thinking! Yet these fine words were conceived not in the modern age, but some 3,300 years ago!

But did you catch their profound implication?

We usually think of compassion as a righteous act of mercy ... as being sensitive to those less fortunate ... right? Yet, here, the Torah teaches us that this is not exactly the meaning of true compassion. True compassion is empathy. We are only truly compassionate when we put ourselves in someone else's shoes, realizing that we both are (or could be) in the same situation.

Indeed, compassion for others is part and parcel of compassion for yourself. Love the stranger ... because you, too, were a stranger.

True compassion does not allow us to go merrily along when someone else is suffering. It does not allow us to get on a high horse from where we condescend to notice those less fortunate. No, absolutely not. We are all on the same level. We are all strangers, and by loving a stranger, we earn the right to be loved as well.

ARE WE ALL STRANGERS?

1. The Tragedy in Boston

All of us were shocked to hear of the tragedy in Boston a few days ago. Two bombs exploding. Bodies torn apart. Three people killed. More than a hundred wounded.

Some of us wept and could not be torn away from the news. Others of us sighed, said “What a terrible world,” and moved on.

Were those who wept over-reacting? Were those who didn’t callous?

What should our response be, when strangers die in a far-away place?

2. What It Means to Love the Stranger

Professor Ze’ev Maghen of Bar Ilan University tells the following story that brought him to an awakening what it means to feel for the stranger:

A while ago I was sitting in this Yemenite restaurant in Jerusalem reading a book and munching my *malawakh* (a delicious doughy thing). At 7 p.m. the air was shrilly pierced – as it is every hour on the hour – by those six long beeps that ... introduce the news. After a run-of-the-mill item ... the anchorperson announced that two hundred and thirty people had been killed in an airplane crash in Indonesia.

“That’s *terrible*,” I thought, and proceeded to cut myself another large, juicy morsel of *malawakh*, drench it in my side-dish of hummous, and loft it lazily into my watering, hangar-like mouth. Yummm. “That’s really *awful*” – oh, there’s a nice big piece of chicken smothered in delectable *Kraif* sauce, come to papa ... mmmm, yummm...

And then I stopped. I was actually a little angry at myself for being unable to get sufficiently upset about those two hundred and thirty Indonesians and their poor, grief-stricken, destroyed families to have it affect my appetite even for *five seconds*. So I tried an experiment. I took the headline I had just heard on the radio, and changed only one or two words. Now it read:

TWO HUNDRED AND THIRTY ISRAELI SOLDIERS DIE IN PLANE CRASH OVER NEGEV DESERT

“Oh. Oh God. Is that what it feels like? Like *that*? That really *hurts*. It physically *hurts*. As if someone punched me really hard in the stomach ... Tell you what, I’m not thinking about my next bite of food anymore, that’s for sure! Hell, I’m pretty close to being nauseous. Oh, *man*. So now I know. Now I have some inkling at least of what those crushed, devastated, innocent families are experiencing right now, as the news reached them one-by-one that everything they ever lived for is gone. Dear *God*...”

You may not believe this, but I actually got up and left without finishing my *malawakh* (and there was at least a third still sitting there on the plate). I know, I know: my momentary abstinence really helped those Indonesian families. That’s not my point ...

[My point is that *empathy* is what] the Torah refers to when it urges in over *twenty* different versions of the same statement – “Love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”¹

¹ *Imagine: John Lennon and the Jews, a Philosophical Rampage* by Ze’ev Maghen, pp. 54-56.

3. The Torah Command

Indeed, this is what we read this week in the Torah:

When a stranger comes to live in your land, do not hurt his feelings. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be like a native among you. You shall love him as yourself, for you, too, were strangers in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.²

Treat strangers with love because you, too, were once strangers.

How sensitive ... how forward thinking! Yet these fine words were conceived not in the modern age, but some 3,300 years ago! And did you catch their profound implication?

4. True Meaning of Compassion

We usually think of compassion as a righteous act of mercy ... as being sensitive to those less fortunate ... right? But here the Torah teaches us that this is not exactly the meaning of true compassion. True compassion is empathy. We are only truly compassionate when we put ourselves in someone else's shoes, realizing that we both are (or once were) in the same situation.

Indeed, compassion for others is part and parcel of compassion for yourself. Love the stranger ... because you, too, were a stranger.³

True compassion does not allow us to get on a high horse from where we condescend to notice those less fortunate ... to lower ourselves to help the needy. No, absolutely not. We are *all* on the same level. We are *all* strangers, and by loving a stranger, we earn the right to be loved as well.

² Leviticus 19:33-34.

³ "Do not indict or dismiss your fellow with your own defect." Rashi from Baba Metzia 59b.

5. A Moving Story (part one)

Allow me to share another story -- a moving story this time -- told by a colleague of mine, a fellow rabbi, to illustrate this point.

A number of years ago, this rabbi gave a class in which he explored the idea that each one of us was sent to this earth with an indispensable mission. And because of this, we are each given unique qualities, all the necessary faculties to fulfill our special task. Even if we are weak or deficient in one area, even if we are born with a “handicap,” we are blessed with other strengths that compensate for and allow us to realize our calling.

After the class, a striking young man came forward. It quickly became clear to the rabbi that this young man suffered from some motor complications which included a speech impediment as well. He explained that he was born with a rare disease which affected his nervous system and which also impaired his mental capacity and growth. And he revealed that, because of this, his parents, fearing the worst, gave him away to an institution for the handicapped when he was still a newborn.

His parents were quite wealthy and prominent -- as he later discovered -- and they ensured that he would have excellent care and education, but they never wanted to have any contact with him. They never came to visit him, and for all practical purposes he was brought up as an orphan. A “privileged orphan,” he was told. All his needs were met, except for the most important one: unconditional love from nurturing parents.

The rabbi was deeply touched by his story and even more so when the young man asked him, “Can you help me discover my unique mission in life? I do not know what strengths I have, what special qualities. I am only aware of my defects.”

It was not hard to identify this young man’s special qualities. He was an exquisite human being with a special charm. Clearly, as a result of his years of struggle with his condition, he had emerged with a very rare type of warmth, which surrounded him in a soft glow. He just wasn’t aware of his own level of refinement.

6. A Moving Story (part two)

As a result of the conversation, a relationship developed between the rabbi and the young man, who shared that he had tracked down his parents and wanted to contact them but was terrified of doing so.

The rabbi decided to help him. After building up his courage, he phoned the young man's father and introduced himself as a friend of his son.

"What can I do for you?" was the brisk and cold response.

"I know your son. He is an extraordinary man, and I thought that would make you proud."

Click ... the father hung up the phone.

The rabbi did not give up. He waited a few days and tried again. This time the father's secretary blocked the call, so the rabbi left a message that "this matter is very personal and can have profound long-term consequences for good or for bad."

The father did not call back. So the rabbi tried for the third time.

This time he got through. He said, "Please understand. I am not in the business of meddling. I am not being critical or judgmental. I simply feel from the depths of my heart that it would be life-transforming for you and your wife to meet your son."

"We don't want to talk about it. We did what we felt was best for everyone."

"I am sure you did. Still, your son has grown to be a tremendous soul. He needs to see you, and you need to see him. Please consider that."

"I'll get back to you."

But he didn't.

7. A Moving Story (part three)

The rabbi persisted.

In the third conversation, feeling the father was softening, the rabbi offered to set up a meeting with the son without the mother (who, he was told, would not be able to deal with the emotions of the moment).

At first the father declined with “No, not yet,” but after several more calls and conversations – which took place over a period of months – a meeting was set up.

All parties insisted that the rabbi be present to serve as a buffer.

The big day came. They met at the parents’ lavish home, with high tea served, everything perfectly choreographed, except for the emotions that were waiting to be released.

At this point the rabbi was wondering if he had done the right thing. But it was too late. Here they all were. Initially, everybody was cordial, even detached, like strangers at a business meeting. “What do you do?” “Where have you traveled?” “Are you a Yankee fan?” “How’s the weather?”

During this the rabbi was mostly silent, trying to let things take their natural course. Finally, he decided to create a bridge for the bottled up emotions:

“I really don’t belong here,” he began, “but, since I am here, allow me to say that your son is one of the most beautiful people I know. I have discovered through him new horizons of human dignity and the capacity of the soul to shine in this harsh world. I think it would be truly life-changing for you to get to know each other on a more personal level and explore your feelings about each other.”

With that opening, the young man turned to his parents and uttered words that could melt any heart. With a stutter and a bit slowly because of his speech impediment, he said “Mamma, Pappa ... I am not perfect. You, too, are not perfect. I have forgiven you. Can you forgive me?”

And everyone burst into tears.

8. We are All Strangers

We are all “strangers” in this world. We are all “special children.” All in need and deserving of unconditional love. This is what we have in common. This is what helps us identify with one another. This is the well from which we can draw empathy for one another.

Ultimately we are all strangers underneath it all. All our souls are strangers on this material planet. The only difference between us is that some of us know this fact and some don't.

Some think that they have made their home on earth and are comfortable living within the physical reality and its institutions. They feel there is nothing else but what they see and hear, nothing more than the here and now that they experience with their senses. They think they are material beings on a material journey, with perhaps some bouts of spiritual, transcendent experiences.

And others – far fewer – know that they are souls on a spiritual journey through a material universe and thus always “strangers,” even when they build their material homes and learn how to maneuver through established conventions. As accustomed as they become to the tangible world, as immersed in it as they may be, they never become part of it, always remaining strangers to the material reality around them.

However we relate to this earth, our strangeness emerges from time to time. And this is why we must always love the stranger, for we are all strangers struggling with our limitations and constraints. And that, of course, is the Hebrew meaning of Egypt – *Mitzrayim*.

Love the stranger, for you too were strangers in Egypt – an Egypt ... *Mitzrayim* ... which you did not altogether leave behind 3,300 years ago but which persists on some level in your current reality. If that is not a reason to have compassion ... empathy ... for our fellow travelers, I don't know what is.

⁴ Baba Kama 92a.

The Talmud teaches us a piercing insight into the human condition: “Those who pray for others, while they themselves have the same need, will be answered first.”⁴ Perhaps this is the source of the saying: “Do me a favor during the rainy season, and I shall do the same for you during the dry season.”

When you think about it, the concept is amazing. Everything comes around. We are all connected. Be kind to strangers “for you, too, were strangers.”

May we all reach out toward one another with the compassion that the Torah teaches us today, and may we make our common journey that much easier to bear for we all share in it. Amen.