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D'var for 1st day Rosh Hashanah, 5779 (2018)

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My mother (z"l) was born in Kolkatta, India. Her parents were part of its Jewish merchant community. The oldest picture I have of her is as a small scowling infant of twenty days, in the arms of her *ayah*, her Indian caregiver. When Mom was seven, her parents' marriage fell apart, spectacularly. In the middle of the night, her mother took her on a plane to Britain, and from there to the United States. They entered on a tourist visa and stayed permanently, granted legal status in 1955 by a special act of Congress. Mom didn't see her father again for a decade. She grew up standing out among the peers with whom she tried so hard to fit in: darker skinned, foreign-born, fatherless. Mom was different. Mom was a stranger living among them. In Hebrew, we would call her a *geir*.

Keep Mom in mind as we talk about our communal Jewish ancestors. In our Torah portion this morning, we heard the wonderful news of the pregnancy of Sarah, Avraham's wife. We read the birth of their son Yitzchak and his circumcision, as he enters into the covenant of the Jewish people. We also read some extraordinarily painful material about the relationship of Sarah, our matriarch, and Hagar, the slave-woman. Sarah now casts Hagar out of their camp along with Ishmael, Hagar and Avraham's son. Hagar's point of entry into Sarah and Avraham's life is debated, but all commentators agree on the origins of her name: Hagar is גֵּרָה "The *geir*." Hagar is not Avraham's wife. She is **Egyptian**, not from Ur Kasdim like Avraham and Sarah. She is not Jewish. In almost every aspect of her identity, Hagar is *different*. Her relationship with Sarah and Avraham is both close and complicated.

We read this text on the first day of Rosh Hashanah to invoke the memories of Avraham and Sarah as the first Jews, and to ask God to remember their faith to our credit as God looks over our own lives this past year. But we also read this story because, while Judaism is a religion that bases holiness on distinction and separation, Torah recognizes that no human and no community exist in a vacuum. As individuals and as groups, we do and must interact with people who are **different** from us: who might not share our customs, our bloodline, our ethnicity, our socioeconomic status, or our faith.

Torah reminds us, forcefully, that we are all strangers at one time or another, in one situation or another. We are all geirim. In fact, here, today, in shul, many of us are strangers to each other! So take a moment right now and look around, find someone you don't know. Make eye contact. Smile. Find them after the service and introduce yourselves. I may be a stranger to you, too, so let me introduce myself now: Hello! I'm Cantor Vera Broekhuysen, and I'm serving as your new spiritual leader.

This story of Sarah, Hagar and Avraham is a great illustration of all the ways in which being a geir, a stranger, can be problematic and painful. But it doesn't give us a positive interpersonal resolution to the tragic tension of their family. So, it's up to us to take the clues scattered throughout the rest of Torah and find a resolution for ourselves. How can we use our own moments or years or generations in geirut, being strangers, to help us both welcome and love the geirim in our lives?

Who is the geir in our lives? Hagar was part of Sarah and Avraham's family. She was the mother of Yitzhak's brother and Avraham's son Ishmael, the first child Avraham circumcised. In our families, geirim can be the people related to us by marriage or adoption. In ourselves as individuals, we have parts of our personalities, even our bodies, that feel unwelcome. In our Jewish community, they

can be non-Jewish people who are integrally part of our community life. In our American community, they are foreigners, particularly the undocumented.

We Jews were geirim ourselves, when we were the strangers in *Mitzrayim*, in Egypt. (This is an elegant inversion, within our story, from Hagar's status.) In our modern society, we may have any or all of the following experiences of being "the stranger":

- moving to a new school, new home, new congregation, new job
- marrying or partnering with a person of a different faith
- being a minority religion within a Christian-majority country
- suffering anti-Semitism as a facet of that experience

My mother had a nose job when she was in her early 30s, a decade before I was born. Another black-and-white photo surfaces from the battered suitcase she filled with photos in the basement, this one a larger self-portrait: puffy raccoon eyes staring up at the camera, and shockingly white plaster over her nose and cheeks. I look a lot like my mother, but it wasn't til I saw photos of her before the surgery that I realized how closely I resemble her. When I asked Mom why she had the nose job, she said vaguely that she'd had a friend training to be a cosmetic surgeon and as a practice case for him, her surgery was cheap. (!) I always wondered, but never vocalized, whether the surgery was a product of her lifelong desire for homogeneity and social stability, after a childhood that had offered neither.

To be a geir is to be in an unstable position, of less power. Geirim are a minority within a majority. The weight and inertia of the majority is a very difficult thing to combat. As a smaller population, geirim have to speak up loud to be heard, and then they run the risk of being censured or even demonized for bucking the trend. In our world, "identity politics" is not often used as a term of praise. Consider, for instance, the struggles of the differently abled, people of

colour, and the LGBTQ community to have their right to access public services be recognized and protected. Particularly trans folk, particularly on the ballot this November in Massachusetts. It's hard for geirim to be recognized as a cohesive group, and if you're not recognized, your group's needs become invisible and aren't met.

Here in our country, if you're a foreigner, you have legally, fewer rights. On a visa or a green card, you can't vote. If you are undocumented, you have no right to representation or to receive social benefits or to even to work. Temporary visitors and undocumented residents are especially vulnerable to abuse and trafficking; often their passports are kept by abusers for blackmail.

No matter your legal residency status, if you are an immigrant to a new country, you can be at a disadvantage because your heart and head are in two places at once. You are away from your family and your homeland and your original social system. You have fewer tangible and emotional resources available to you. In the language of pastoral care, immigration is a state of "incomplete loss," where your loved ones are not dead but they're not accessible to you. This loss can be even harder to bear than death, because it never completely resolves.

In a Jewish context, non-Jews can sometimes feel not-chosen. They may not be acquainted with Jewish liturgy, with Jewish traditions, jokes, foods....It's rare for a non-Jew to know Hebrew - and mind you, not every Jew does, though if you want to learn, Rav Mona is teaching a class this fall! There are also elements of Jewish ritual participation that aren't available to non-Jews. These vary by community: another level of disorientation. Jewish converts (who are also traditionally called "geirim") might, even after conversion, feel not yet perfectly at home with the culture of their chosen Jewish community, or its ritual. And as for Jews from birth: I remember desperately thumbing through the siddur in the women's balcony in an Orthodox synagogue of the Gruzim, the Georgian Jews, in Tbilisi, after a decade mostly absent from synagogue life. Let me tell you, I was a

fish out of water. These experiences, too, can be uncomfortable, even painful, even for people known and loved within a Jewish community.

We know, urgently, from our own Jewish history, from Rome to the Sho'ah to the shul near New Orleans desecrated just this past week, that difference has been used as a basis for discrimination for a very, very long time, particularly by people in power.

So what's the relationship between Hagar - the geir - and the power brokers in our Torah story?

Avraham and Sarah are the ruling majority in our story today. Sarah in particular is a person of power. Her name is often translated as "princess;" "sar" is a political (and often military) head of a Biblical clan. God, God's self, tells Avraham to listen to Sarah and to do all she says (B'reishit 21:12). Sarah makes the decisions.

Hagar is a slave, vulnerable, sexually exploited. She is forced by Sarah to be Avraham's concubine and the mother of a child that Sarah initially claims as her own. Hagar lives under the threat that she won't be allowed to take care of her child and to bring him up as his mother.

The Muslim Qur'an tells the story of Hagar and Ishmael's expulsion into the desert. In that account, Hagar runs between two hills seven times, desperately looking for water, trying not to watch her child die of thirst. An angel points her to the well of water that God provides, letting her and her child survive, thrive, and go on to found a great nation of people. Humanitarian workers from an Arizonan organization called No More Deaths have been putting out stores of water and food for desperate immigrants crossing a border desert in 110 degree heat. But they're not called angels. Nine have been charged with abandonment of property on federal land, and are facing criminal court. Our government is cur-

rently engaged in the business of separating immigrant parents and children. Some by jail, and some by deportation. The parents and their legal representation, when they're lucky enough to have it, run back and forth between agency and agency, country and country, trying to find the information that will let the children and their families reunite and go on to have a life together. People of power are not always kind to geirim. They don't have to be.

But despite her power, Sarah is no villain in our Torah story. She is a very *human* figure, one with whom it's easy for us to identify. She initially disbelieves the power of God to help her aging, previously infertile body bear a child. We hear her delighted laughter in his name when her son Yitzchak is born - "Yitzchak" means "He will laugh." She shows jealousy of Hagar, both as Avraham's lover and as the mother of his child, who could edge out Sarah's own beloved son from his inheritance. All of these are traits we can recognize in our own society, perhaps even in ourselves.

Sarah and Avraham and Hagar never figure out how to be in community, and family, together. Ultimately Hagar is expelled from the camp, and she and Ishmael never see Avraham, Sarah and Yitzchak in Torah again. What a loss, to every member of that family. Imagine if the three of them had sat down together, once they learned of Sarah's pregnancy, and said, ok, how do we make this work? What if they'd spoken their needs honestly to one another? What if they'd acknowledged both the difficulty and the value of the family they shared?

Why was it so hard for Sarah and Avraham to truly accept and live with Hagar as family? The presence of a geir can inspire fear in even the most powerful majority. Fear of displacement. Fear of losing cultural identity. Fear of having to put up with, or even participate in, customs or traits we don't feel we share. These fears are natural.

But if we stop at fear, we lose out on love.

Torah teaches in a later verse, from D'varim or Deuteronomy (10:19). וְאָהַבְתֶּם אֶת־הַגֵּר כִּי־גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם "You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." On the foundation of that bitter, confined experience, we are commanded to build love. We have to figure out how to recognize and love the geir, that not-quite-the-same body part of our communities, our families. Greet, welcome, build relationship. Hold honour and curiosity about difference. Celebrate together what you can celebrate together; be honest with one another about disagreements. Value the person and the strength of your relationship with them, over your fears of what could happen if they come to share your inheritance. Ultimately, find common goals - from as simple as starting a conversation or cooking a meal to as lofty as *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world - and then work together towards those goals.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of England, writes that "We encounter God in the face of a stranger. That, I believe, is the Hebrew Bible's single greatest and most counterintuitive contribution to ethics. God creates difference; therefore it is in one-who-is-different that we meet God. " (Rabbi Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, p. 59)

My mother built community around me all my life. I grew up in a puppy pile of "godfamily," with two Asian-American families whose parents and mine were godparents to each other's children. On all the year's holidays, we crowded around each other's tables, put our feet up on each other's sofas, helped make each other's food. Strangers were always welcome, and nobody called ahead to ask permission to bring them. My mother's kitchen, saffron yellow, smells like onions and garlic frying in my memory; it brushes my face with the warmth of brewing tea and bodies at ease. Mom took her childhood experience of geirut, un-belonging, and spent the rest of her life creating spaces and systems in which not only her family, but everyone she met, could belong.

That's my heritage. That's the kind of welcoming space I'm excited to live in with you. What we did together, a few minutes ago, that's how we begin: see, acknowledge, greet one another. Greet God in one another. Going forward, we build closer and deeper relationship by sharing and hearing our different stories, and our different goals. For example, you can tell that this issue of being a stranger and welcoming a stranger is personally very important to me. I'm sure as we spend more time together, you'll grow to know even more about why. It's very important to me to also grow to know YOU: what YOU feel and what YOU care about. We might not be identical - as they say, two Jews, three opinions. I hope you'll come and talk to me in the next months, and share your story and your goals for your life and our community.

We are at this very moment creating our own stories and goals. We are celebrating the joy of Rosh Hashanah; and we are examining ourselves, as Yom Kippur approaches, for those places where we could do better in the coming year. We're making t'shuvah, repentance or return. Tanakh's later verses on treating the geir with empathy and kindness, all 36 of them, can be read as God's way of telling us that what Sarah and Avraham did to Hagar was not right. You cannot cast out the parts of your country, your family, or yourself, that seem unfamiliar or don't align seamlessly with what and whom you think you should be. You're connected. To try to sever or deny that connection harms both you and the geir, whether that geir is outside of you or inside of you. My mother asked someone to take a knife to her nose, to make her body conform to popular American culture. But in my memory, she was in fact happiest wrapping her hair up in a scarf to shell peas; cooking dal; and smiling at me over the Shabbat candles. When she allowed every part of herself to shine.

Avraham and Sarah could have done better by Hagar. And we, ourselves, have the opportunity to DO better. Ultimately, this is also t'shuvah: not just returning to the root of yourself but helping the parts of yourself that you've cast

out, to return. May we find every part of ourselves that we need in this new year,
and may we greet them with gladness. L'shanah tovah.