

Welcoming the Stranger

A Sermon by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis (z"l)

Temple Valley Beth Shalom, Encino, CA

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(This is a transcription of an audio recording which can be found at www.hmsi.info or www.schulweisinstitute.com)

Sabbath after Passover. And Passover, as you know, is a great and a wonderful festival, the festival with a great deal of anticipation, great deal of anticipation because it deals with very important moments in the history of Jewish life. And, in my home, I must tell you, that we can hardly wait until the eighth day is over. It's an unusual thing how -- how much we crave to return to the normalcy of commerce. I mean, matzah is very, very nice, and very fine. But rye bread, and pumpernickel, and bagel are richer.

It's very hard for people to live with the bread of affliction. It's very difficult for people, any kind of people, to live with the bread of poverty. But if there's anything that's true about our tradition, it is that it doesn't allow us to forget who we were, what our origins happen to be, where we come from. There's not a single Kiddush, not on Shabbat, not on Passover, not shul, not on Sukkot, not on Simchat Torah, not on Shemini Atzeret, in which one does not include the most important phrase of all, *Zecher Litziat Mitzrayim*, a remembrance of our exodus from Egypt and from bondage.

The Ten Commandments doesn't begin with the declaration, "I am the Lord thy God who created the heavens and earth," but it begins with, "I am the Lord, thy God. I am the Lord your God, who took you from out of the land of Egypt and from the land of slavery."

The rabbis in the Talmud tell us that 36 times, there is one iteration. Thirty-six times, there is a constant pounding into the psyche of the Jew. "You shall love that stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Pounded over and over again. You were slaves. You were pagans. You were poor. You were aliens. You were foreigners. You were pariahs.

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You were exploited. Now, I want you to know that in any tradition, when you have a repetition of 36 times, reminding you that you were a slave, it means, and it's a fairly good guess, that there's a great deal of resistance to remembering that you were slaves. And that resistance is a very important one. But it has to be understood, always will be, especially with people who have made it, especially with people who are free, especially with people who are accepted, especially with people who are in the in-crowd.

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And Judaism is one continuous struggle against amnesia. Judaism is a recognition that if you forget your suffering, something snaps in you, and the Jewish connection is broken. There is a recognition that you have got to remember suffering, and it's a very difficult thing to do who are just -- and it's not even -- it doesn't even sound so Jewish. After all, we are not a masochistic tradition. We are not a tradition of self-denial. We are not a tradition of asceticism. We are not a tradition of celibacy. We are not a tradition of masochism.

But there is a very keen and shrewd observation that if you lose the capacity to feel the embarrassment of others, if you and I lose the capacity for imagination, which is the key to morality, if we lose that gift of empathy that enables me to jump out of the skin of my prosperity and my security into the trembling heart of the stranger, we are going to lose our souls. We are going to lose our character. We are going to lose our Yiddishkeit. We are going to lose the whole thing; the reason for our existence both as individuals and as part of the community.

How do you make a people give a damn? Any society? On what logical ground am I supposed to convince myself or you that it's important for me to extend myself in an altruistic fashion and to care for people who are down and out? What kind of logic is it that says, "It's your obligation, because you're a Jew, to be concerned with poor people, or with weak people, or with frightened people, or with old people"? Why?

Are you going to use some rational arguments, like for example, if you don't take care of the poor, if you don't take care of the disinherited, if you don't take care of the -- of the submerged, there's going to be such a seething cauldron of rage and resentment that'll break down the -- the oil of the worlds of society? I'm not frightened by that.

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Listen. It's going to happen, it's going to happen. It will happen later; it will happen to somebody else. It's in a distant future. Meanwhile, it doesn't affect me. Meanwhile, you can cut the dawning bloodsuckers living off welfare. You can cut the budget any way that you want, as long as you lower the taxes and allow me to invest. You can use benign neglect so you can use police force, but don't give me that kind of stuff to move me because if I don't take care of the disenfranchised and of the weak and of the complaining, there will be a revolution. Now, I must say the Bible, as far as I know, does not use the logic of self-interest. But it appeals to only one thing. It appeals to your moral imagination.

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It appeals to your memory. You remember the whiplash that cut deep into your flesh. You remember the stench of the cremated flesh of the crematoria. You remember the children that were buried in the pyramids. You remember the Cossacks. You remember the commissar. You remember the SS men. You remember what it felt to be laughed at because you didn't understand what was going on because you were an outcast, because you looked so stupid and ridiculous because of your clothes and because of your accent, and you were spat upon and you were excluded. I remember that.

I remember as a child, my grandfather, finding that I was using a little deceit, that I used to swallow the maror, the bitter herb, in one gulp so as not to taste the bitterness of the maror. And he would say to me, "He who swallows the bitterness so as not to taste it, and doesn't digest it, and doesn't feel it, has deceived the mandate." And that is not the way to do the mitzvah.

We come from a tradition that is very unusual. You have to understand that the Bible was written at a time when the dominant civilization of Egypt, of Babylonia, of the Sumerians, have their own code of ethics. Think of the Code of Hammurabi in the 20th century before the common era. There, the slave was shackled. And anybody who sheltered a fugitive runaway slave was to be condemned to death. Or among the Greeks, and among the Romans, a runaway bondman was, on the occasion of his recapture, branded with a hot, red hot iron.

Think of the United States of America in the last century. You all read Uncle Tom's Cabin. A fugitive slave was tracked and pursued by bloodhounds, and when he

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was captured, he was beaten up, and he was chained. Take a look at this text, the Bible, a primitive book. In Deuteronomy 23, "That if a slave, whether he's a Jew or a non-Jew, runs away from his master, "You shall not return him to his master. Then the runaway shall live with you, in the midst of you, in the place which he shall choose within one of the gates where it liketh him best. You shall not wrong him." Why? Because you were slaves yourself. Why? Because you and your fathers and your mothers understand the fear of pursuit. You know the anguish of the outcast, and because you believe in God. You said you believe in God. You tend to the synagogue and you recited, "Hear O Israel the Lord our God, the Lord is one." Who cares if the Lord is one or the Lord is two or the Lord is three or the Lord is four or that there are many lords or no lord at all?

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Jews care, because there was a corollary to the belief in the oneness of God, and it's found again in the text, in Bamidbar, in the Book of Numbers, "There shall be one Lord, one statute, one ordinance for you who are citizens who inhabit the land, and for you who are strangers who come into the land, because you are a believer in God." Not the god of the metaphysicians. Not of the god of the philosophies and the theologians who can prove metaphysically the existence of God, but the god whom you have experienced in your trials and tribulations in the heat of the desert, in the dunghills. God to whom the Bible describes as who does justice for the fatherless and for the widow and loves the stranger.

Listen. People don't want to remember or to be reminded of their origin. People forget. And Jews are people. And Jews forget. In January 20th of 1790, when the makers of the French Revolution declared equality for citizens of the Sephardic persuasion, those who came from Spain and Portugal, the Jews who lived in Bordeaux, the elegant Jews, the Jews who are emancipated, cultured, and refined to all of the aristocratic values of France of 1790, womanizers, profligates, luxury people, when in 1790 the proclamation was declared, it was only for the Jews of Bordeaux. Not for the Jews Alsace.

Not for the Jews of the cities of Metz. Not for the Jews who came from Poland or Germany, who are usurers, forced to become usurers, who were unassimilated, who had funny ways about them and shabby clothes. And, you know, the Jews of Bordeaux absolutely forgot. They simply forgot that there is one Lord for you and for the stranger. They forgot that they were one people. I don't have to go back to the 18th century. I have a *Zayda*, and I have a *Babeh*, and so do you.

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They happen to have come from East Europe. They came from Poland. They came with all kinds of fantasies about the gold and a Medina; this wonderful gold land. And they found toward the end, with great disappointment, that it wasn't so gold and it wasn't so honest and there was an awful lot of faking and an awful lot of exploitation and they called it Amere Ceganif. They came off the steerage, stupefied, penniless, exhausted, refused, with strange clothing and broken tongues, and they were crowded in dark tenement houses, and they eked out a living in sweatshops with pushcarts in Hester Street, in Canal, in Division Street, in Orchard Street.

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And there were other Jews. Jews who had made it. Jews who were the uptown Jews. Jews who were part of -- and I say this is not a contemporary political sense, but only for historical reasons, members of the Republican Party. Jews who had really, party in 1881.

An entirely different party. Jews from the uptown who looked down upon the downtown Jews, the greenhorns, and the -- even rabbis like Max Lilienthal, who suggested in 1881, after the pogroms in Russia, and after the main lords, that it would be a very good idea if you took the stream of immigration, which was flooding the gates of the United States of America, and you diverted it and send it to Palestine. And that's because Max Lilienthal, so you understand, was a Zionist. He couldn't stand Palestine. He was an anti-Zionist, but because he had made it, and because he had forgotten the root experience of Jewish life. Because he had forgotten that you were a slave, and you were an immigrant, and you were homeless, and you were uprooted. And now that you have made it, you will become fat, and coarse, and selfish, and ugly.

Not everybody. Not all the German Jews, and it's important for us to remember this. The National Council of Jewish Women was made up mostly of German Jews; German Jewish women. In 1893, they were the first to protect immigrant Jewish girls from predatory white slavers, or Jews who awaited these girls on the docks and sold them into prostitution.

There was an organization called the HIAS. It still is the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society, which was formed with volunteer lawyers, lawyers who volunteered their

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time to go down to Ellis Island, to other immigration stations to see to it that these *nebuch* people would be protected from the misinterpretation of the law. There were people in the HIAS who conducted employment agencies and shelter houses.

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There were German Jews like the Strauses and like Jacob Schiffs, who organized the educational alliance, night schools and settlement houses and daycare centers and seminars in English and poetry and philosophy, in art, in music, choral groups and singing societies, out of which there came people whom you now recognize. The great Jacob Epstein, Chaim Gross, Ben Shahn, the Soyer brothers, painters, artist, the philosopher Morris Raphael Cohen, all started with that kind of help.

And now, we are in America. And we are in the United States. And we are in Los Angeles. And then now comes to us a challenge and an opportunity. Hundreds upon hundreds of Jews who flee from either the persecution and the politic side of the Soviet Union. Or now in recent days, in recent months, in recent years, Jews who come from Iran, who are confused and who are lonely, and many of whom come to the synagogue on Friday night and on Sabbaths and during the week. And they are *Gerim*.

They are strangers, and they are caught in a terrible web of resentment. They say that they are Iranians, and the ire of the average American who is so vindictive and understandably hateful of the Ayatollah Khomeini, looks at him askance. They are devoid of legal counsel, and they don't understand a single thing. How can they understand a single thing?

I had to fill out my income tax, and thank God, there's a literate friend that I have who was able to explain to me how to fill out that particular form. A friend of mine tells me that there are Jewish young men and women from Iran, many of whom speak some English and are attending school and colleges in the greater Los Angeles area, and they need host families. And there are some children here who need foster homes.

Not all of these things can be done by you and me, and I understand it. But I will tell you what they come for. What they come for here on a Friday night, what they come here on a Shabbat, what they come here with -- with their children and

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their families; they don't come here for *tzedakah*. They come here for a pair of eyes. They come here for a friendly face. They come here because they know that they belong in the shul. Where else should they go?

They come here with all kinds of barriers; language barriers and dialect barriers, and more race and cultural barriers. But it's incredible what you can do with all the barriers in the world if you extend a hand and you say to someone, "I would like to invite you to my home for a Shabbat dinner." It is incredible and it is important to understand the power of a handshake, the power of an embrace, the power of a smile.

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We, at Valley Beth Shalom, are honored by those who come to this synagogue, because they give us an opportunity to make out of an institution, a sanctuary, a refuge, and a home. We are proud that twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursday at 7:30 in the evening, there are Iranian classes for Iranians who seek to learn English. We are proud of the Havurot who have opened up their Havurah to the *ger*, to the stranger, to the loved one in our midst, and who have invited them to join the Havurah.

We are proud of those of you who do not avert your eyes and do not allow them to be relegated to some separate little group. We are proud of you because this is the essence of life. For God's sakes, if there's anything the Jews are noted for, it is *rachmonis*, compassion, the capacity to suffer; the capacity, at least, to empathize with those who are afraid, and to identify and to help. That's the essence of Judaism.

And that is what I want to say to Trisha. What kind of a message can you give to Trisha and to her generation? We'd be saying to Trisha, as I will, that if there is any particular verse, any particular commandment, any particular ethic that expresses Jewish life, it is the particular verse from the very book from which you chanted so beautifully, from the Book of Leviticus, "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself." It doesn't say somebody far away because it's easy to love the person in Moscow. It is a *mechayeh* to love the person who is now living in Tehran.

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It is not an accident, say the rabbis, that it says you shall love the neighbor; the one who parks in your driveway, the one who burned some incinerator, the one with a barking dog, the one who sits in your seat. That is important, because that is the test of love. And what is it that you're supposed to do? Of course, you're supposed to love your neighbor, in what way? And I'll tell you the way that is most important. And that is the way in which you relate to him, not the amount of money that you give. You can't reduce all of ethics to a checkbook.

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Tolstoy, who was a Russian, and a very great writer, novelist, and great friend of Judaism and the Jews, once told a story, which I was told when I was about your age. It was a story about a poor man, a beggar, who came to a man and asked him for some money. The man looked through his pockets and he said, "I have nothing for you. I'm afraid I have nothing to give you, my brother." And the beggar said, "I want to thank you very much." The man said, "Why are you thanking me? I didn't give you anything." "What do mean you didn't give any -- you called me brother."

I cannot tell you how important it is to call someone a brother, a sister, a fellow Jew. I cannot tell you what it means to embrace the stranger, and to make the stranger feel at home. For you know that we are all of us strangers. And that we are all of us vulnerable, and that we are all of us alone. I know Trisha's family well. I know the family and I know this is a Havurah, and I know that this is a family with compassion, with a capacity to suffer, to feel for others, and that is the greatest attribute that a human being can have. I couldn't care less how smart Trisha is. I couldn't care less how fluently she reads the haftarah. I couldn't care less whether she remembers the lessons. But I do care that she remembers that she is a child of a people that was spat upon, that were humiliated, that were shackled, that were burned. And who remember this, and therefore, will not look at another human being, except with compassion. Blessed are those who have within them *rachmonis*, because that is the essence of Jewishness.