

Rosh Hashanah 5777/ 2016

Rabbi Lester Bronstein

“*Zikkaron: Identity and Memory*” (or “Strangers to Ourselves”)

I.

ki gerim heyitem b'erezt mitzrayim. “For you were strangers in the Land of Egypt.” *Gerim heyitem?* Strangers you were? *Afilu l'atzm'chem heyitem gerim.* Even to yourselves you were strangers. So much so that you primarily remember the feeling of *not knowing* that you were strangers. So that now you mostly know how to *forget* the pain of estrangement, *and you have become strangers to yourselves.*

II.

If you are not a Jewish teenager or young adult, or if you don't work with Jewish teenagers or young adults (as I am privileged to do), you may not fully feel the sting of what I'm going to tell you. But please try. And if you fall into those “millennial” or post-millennial categories, please bear with me while I talk *about* you to your parents and grandparents' generations. But also *to* you, if you care to listen in.

Jewish teenagers were born between 1995 and 2003. Just ahead of them are late Millennials, now young adults just out of college but not yet thirty. Which means they don't remember most of the seminal historical events that occurred in the first decade of *this* century, much less the cataclysms we all experienced at the end of the last century. Or for many of us, the events of the *middle* of the last century. This is vitally important to consider, because it helps us to understand why their thinking is not informed by many of the experiences – the emotional, “gut”

experiences as well as the intellectual ones - that comprise older adults' world view. And for Jews, *al achat kama v'chama*. How much the more so.

As Jews born in North America at the turn of the twenty-first century, they have no clue about the time when Israel did not exist, or when it could barely defend itself, or when it had to resist an unrelenting series of existential attacks on its survival (both military and diplomatic – remember 1975, “Zionism equals Racism?”). They only know Israel as strong, confident, accomplished, often arrogant, and yes, as an occupier of territory beyond its own internationally recognized borders.

They don't emote at the passing of the great Shimon Peres, the last of Israel's founding generation, the generation that risked everything for a cause we take for granted; a cause which our children may not even begin to comprehend. Peres represented the Israel that all the world wants it to be and knows it *can* be. Our children may not even understand that vision, that version, of our Jewish State.

Likewise, our offspring have no concept of American Jews' experience of discrimination in education and employment – in America; of their changing their names, straightening their hair and bobbing their noses in order to “pass;” of their having to put up with -and participate in - overtly Christian religious rituals and symbols virtually everywhere in the public domain – schools, courts, places of business, town squares, sporting events, and so forth. [Remember the Jewish kids' secret code, “and lead us not into Penn Station?”] When one explains to them the history of Jewish hospitals or of Brandeis University as places unique in American society where not only Jews could seek admission, but persons of all religions and races, their blank stares tell it all.

Most importantly, they see themselves as well-off white Americans who think they have been fully integrated into the power-base of the American system for centuries. They either flaunt that status, or they fret with guilt about it, or both, but in any case it isn't true. Yes, they've heard stories of great-grandparents coming here from Russia or Poland, but they can't grasp the notion that these ancestors were not Russians or Poles (and certainly not Anglo-Saxons). That if they were, they would probably have stayed where they were. That when it began to sink in that the oppression of Jews in the Tsarist East, and soon after that the Soviet Union, would only intensify, and that antisemitism in the West would soon turn Europe into Hell itself, it was already too late to get into the United States. That the gates of America had closed on people who looked and talked and thought like us. And that when boatloads of desperate Jewish refugees headed in this direction in the late nineteen-thirties and throughout World War II (to the land of the free and the home of the brave, to the land that beckoned to the world's tired, poor, and huddled masses yearning to breathe free), they were turned back to their deaths.

III.

In other words, our own children – even if we've taken them to Israel five times – don't all immediately know what's wrong with the line they hear at their campus's anti-Israel demonstrations, namely, that Israel is a white European colonialist project whose sole purpose was – and still is – to displace the indigenous population of Palestine and exploit those who remained. Like the French in Morocco, or the Portuguese in Brazil, or the British raj in India. Or the message that the Zionists were Poles and Germans and Russians of Mosaic persuasion out to dupe the world into believing a fabricated “history” of themselves as the authentic ancient denizens of this vulnerable little patch of the Muslim world.

Likewise our own children - even if we've ferried them to Ellis Island and marched them up to the crown of the Great Lady of the Harbor, and even if we've gushed with pride as we read with them the words of the very Jewish Emma Lazarus - don't really recognize their own particularly Jewish identity in this confusing sea of "identity politics" they find themselves growing up in.

IV.

Well, many of the actual exploits of our beloved Israel's governments in the post-1967 territories haven't helped the situation. [Not just this current government; *all* of Israel's governments since the war that saved Israel from annihilation, including Shimon Peres's governments.] When our kids get to college and run into people who show them those facts – and some of those facts are most definitely factual – they immediately harden themselves against Israel.

That's tragic, because neither they nor their parents have fully grasped the function of Israel as a *sine qua non* in the overall fate of Jews everywhere, including in this "safe place" where we are the most able to "pass" as someone or something else, where we are able to pretend that Israel is irrelevant to our Jewish lives. It's more tragic still, because those facts are often served up without any truthful context whatsoever, usually by people who (it seems to me) have become the reincarnation of the anti-Semites of a century ago, not only in Europe but in the US as well. [cf. Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*.] Tragic, because we need our kids to engage in all of the positive work being done in order to help Israel *become* the bastion of civil liberties, religious freedom, human rights, and social tolerance that its Declaration of Independence proudly proclaims, and that it is far from having achieved. We need them to do all of these things *for* Israel, not *against* Israel.

And the indifference – or worse, the closed-off attitudes - of many of us American Jews to the pleas of refugees fleeing Syria, ISIS, Sudan, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Latin America, and on and on, trying to get into our country? Our attitudes don't help in the effort to convince our kids that we Jews really are the famous folk who “remember that we were strangers.” *Zakhor ki gerim heyitem b'erezt mitzrayim*. When we behave as if we don't even know what a stranger is, we are not only acting against our great moral tradition, we're also dooming our efforts at Jewish continuity. Jewish continuity, because we are not modeling deep-structure Jewish behaviors for the next generation of Jews.

Now in truth, many of our own Bet Am Shalom high school kids do seem to have a clue about Israel, and about their Jewish identity in America. And many of those who return from college have not drunk someone else's kool-aid. They still think for themselves. They still question everything they hear out there, even as they healthily question us. Question *me*.

But what I hear from my colleagues out there is not a pretty picture. Often they say that their college kids claim to renounce Israel and reject their affinity with the American Jewish establishment *because* of their adherence to the Jewish “values” we inculcated in them. That when they compare Jewish values to Jewish actions, they vote for values, albeit values heavily filtered by a secularized media-shaped world that cannot or will not include the ancient values of peoplehood, tradition, family, history, and *pikuakh nefesh* – the preserving of life, including one's own life.

V.

How to convince our kids? And here I'm asking broad questions about *all* of our Jewish kids, not primarily Bet Am Shalom kids.

How to convince our kids that first of all we Jews *are* indigenous to the land of Israel? How to convince them to trust us when we tell them that we (their parents, grandparents, rabbis, and educators) fully believe that the Palestinian Arabs are *also* indigenous to the same land? (In other words: that we're the good guys on the central Jewish identity-politics issue of our time.) That we ourselves have worked for decades to promote a two-state approach to this intractable struggle, both because we are morally fair and because we understand the complicated historical facts?

That by contrast the folks who feed them anti-Israel hate speech over the internet and on their high school and college campuses consider the presence of Israel to be entirely illegitimate, to be a malignant white tumor on the body of a poor, exploited people of color?

How to show them that most of the Jewish population of Israel came as desperate refugees like the people they see arriving in rafts on the shores of Lesbos and Turkey, unless we're talking about the Jews who came around the turn of the twentieth century to create a Jewish safe haven *in anticipation of* the inevitable Jewish refugee crisis that loomed large, and that indeed came to pass on a scale unseen in human history? How to convince our kids that that's *their* history?

How to convince them that the Jewish establishment throughout North America invests millions of dollars annually in physical resettlement and in political advocacy on behalf of the world's oppressed peoples, including but by no means primarily the *Jewish* oppressed? That synagogues across the country – *synagogues like our very own!* – are deeply involved in the effort to resettle refugees here in America, and to use our influence to pry open the legal barriers to immigration and refugee relief?

How to demonstrate to them that many Jewish religious and lay leaders throughout America continue to expose themselves to political risk by marching alongside African Americans in *their* struggle to change the way law enforcement sees, polices, and incarcerates Americans of color?

How to convince our children of all ages that what leads us to do these things is our unabashed *Jewishness*? Not the Jewishness a sociologist can map as a pattern of behaviors associated with the population known familiarly as “Jews.” Rather, the Jewishness of the *mitzvot* we perform out of our historic Jewish sense of commanded-ness.

VI.

How? I don’t know how. But my dedicated educational director and I – and our colleagues here and across the land – are doing our best to build *trust* between us and our teenagers and young adults, to the point that they will at least identify with our passion if not yet with our beliefs. We hope that if we remain honest in our teaching and in our presenting of facts; that if we assure them that we are listening to their points of view, even as we acknowledge that they are listening to ours; that if we stay true to our authentic selves and not try to recast our image to pander to their generation’s authentic values or styles...

Then perhaps we stand a chance to convince most of them that it is good to be a Jew; good to be an American; good to support a just, Jewish, democratic State of Israel coexisting with a peaceful, independent State of Palestine; good to open our American doors to the world’s huddled masses and help with their resettlement; good to stand as a bridge between people of good faith of all colors and configurations. Good to have an *identity* as a Jew, as one who “remembers that we were strangers,” and who remembers that so many of our fellow human beings are strangers still.

Ki gerim heyitem b'erezt mitzrayim. We who do remember being strangers *here*, we of all people need to transmit that sense of obligation to our children – to *you, our children* – to act on our memory. Our task is not to make you, our children, feel like strangers yourselves. That would be impossible, not to mention undesirable. But we need to find a way to convey to you that *you* are direct descendants of people who themselves knew the indignity of estrangement. We must inspire you to take up the cause – not as former oppressors who have seen the light, but as the formerly oppressed whose tradition tells you to respond to the divine call.

Maybe we have fallen down on our job. Maybe we've conveyed the values, but not the feeling behind them. We may have “estranged” our *universal* values from our *particular* tradition. Before we can model that fusion of ideals and selfhood to our progeny, we may need to re-fuse the two within our own selves. That is indeed what we try to remember to do every fall when the New Year comes ‘round.

VII.

Good to remember, on this day of *Zikaron* – this day when we summon up our *chutzpah* to ask *God* to remember. And when God returns the favor, by asking *us* to remember who *we* are, and what we have promised to do.

Our children may or may not follow our lead. But first we must lead ourselves. We must lead ourselves home.

Ki gerim heyitem – you *were* strangers, yes, even to yourselves. But now you must be strangers to yourselves no more.