

**Parshat K'doshim – Loving the stranger in our midst.** (R. Frank Tamburello)

Parshat K'doshim deals with the aspect of community relationships. According to the Talmud, there are 613 commandments. This number connected our responsibilities as members of the Jewish community to the number of days of the year (365), and the number of the parts of the body (248) as conceived by the ancient world. So the number 613, reminds us that we must be faithful to God's will on every day of the year, and we must serve God with every part of our being. Some of these commandments are better known than others. Good examples are the observance of Shabbat and other holy days, the commandments not steal or murder, and so forth. The Jewish culture has developed various means to promote and fulfill these commandments as well. For example, we have kosher butchers, caterers, and restaurants, cookbooks and product markings to maintain certain laws of kashrut, which some of us go to great lengths to observe.

However, there are certain commandments, some repeatedly mentioned in the Torah, which seem to get short shrift, and fall along the wayside. In this week's parsha we read, "If a foreigner stays with you in your land, do not treat this person wrongfully, rather treat the foreigner like the native-born among you – you are to love them as you love yourselves, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am Adonai, your God." (Leviticus – Vayikra 19, 33-34). We are to treat strangers as ourselves, and yet, how often is this unbelievable commandment paradoxically overlooked?

This commandment connects our experience in Egypt, with how we act today. Since we are admonished never to forget what had been done to us, it is incumbent on us to use that memory on behalf of our relating properly to others. The term "foreigner" or "stranger" has different meanings. The word "ger" is used to describe a Jew-by-choice, one who voluntarily embraces Judaism, and the Jewish people. We are required to relate to them with respect and love, never alluding negatively to their previous status as a non-Jew. We need to remember, what it was like for us to live as a group in the culture of an Egypt where we not born, but where we came by choice. This directive reminds us of what it means to be a minority in a majority culture; that we must relate to any minority or outcast group in our society with respect, justice and love.

This commandment also has special meaning for our synagogues and Jewish groups and organizations. Hospitality is a hallmark of Jewish culture. Why, then, so often do Jews complain that they feel unwelcome when they enter a house of worship for the first time, or that they need to pass a certain litmus test of belief before they are accepted a part of that Jewish community?

We can all help to strengthen our Jewish communities, and also the larger human community of which we are also a part by spreading this commandment of loving the stranger. By doing so, we can help heal those of us who are damaged by all-too-negative experiences in their communities and even in their homes, for it is possible for us to be a stranger even in our own families. Such love breaks down barriers of fear, negativity, and suspicion, and extends blessing to all who come our way.