

From the Rabbi

September 2017

Elul 5777

### “Strangers Within”

*The Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (RRA) invited me to participate in their ongoing newsletter series, wherein colleagues contribute short takes on a pressing question. They asked “Who are the strangers, within or without our communities, whom we need to welcome? What does it mean to welcome someone? Who is succeeding at welcoming others, and how might we build on that experience?” Here is my reply, which I hope will serve as a helpful kavvanah (centering thought) as we approach the new year:*

When people would ask me to describe our congregation, I used to boast to them about the joyous seriousness of our *davening*; the dedication and intensity of our *lehrhaus*-style adult learning; the courage of our social action undertakings; and the pride our people take in being a reasonably successful experiment in creating Jewish sacred peoplehood.

Now I cut to the chase: I say that the main thing one needs to know about our community is that *our people take care of each other*. They visit each other at home and in the hospital. They make dinner for the family of someone who is in some kind of deep trouble, whether it be health or otherwise. They wave a wand and a *shiva* appears, from *daveners* to meals to follow-up after the mourning has concluded. If the sick person or mourner is single or widowed, our community gets the word around and the person gets “lifted up.” Congregants beyond driving age or capability get calls with offers for rides to services and classes, for as long as they are alive. Almost no one gets left out unless they really want to.

It wasn't always so. We used to work so hard on the “showcase” matters of congregational life that we forgot how painfully horrid it is to be incapable of taking care of oneself; of how lonely it is not to be contacted when everyone else is “doing fine” in their work, family, friendships, and especially in their interaction with their beloved Jewish community. We forgot the fact that the more we *kvelled* about how great our programs, services, classes, lectures, and social action endeavors were, the more we

were leaving out people who in many cases had done the heavy lifting in years gone by to make our current infrastructure possible, but who were no longer able to partake.

I realize I am not talking about people “outside the tent.” Indeed, there are countless folks out there who don’t even know how to walk into our building. Wise-guy answer: Through the front door! But that is *not* an answer for someone who feels spiritually or mentally blocked from approaching that door. Answering that door is all-important. It is why, after all these years, our high holy day “sanctuary” still has no doors at all.

Yet while we are industriously working to get those people in; to go out and escort them through the portal if necessary; to speak to them from the moment they enter to the moment they leave; to smother them with kindness and hospitality; to make them wish they could even be left alone for a moment to contemplate the intensity of the spiritual-cultural phenomenon they’ve just encountered; to make sure they know we don’t care whether they’re straight or queer, white or brown, male, female, or other, Jewish or not sure...

While we are doing all of those holy things, we need to remember that some long-time members of the congregation can be the most estranged strangers of all. They don't know anyone any more. Or they do, but they feel forgotten by a community that concentrates its programmatic resources on "young families" and "the future of our synagogue." Or they are too incapacitated to walk or drive here.

These strangers within are not the future, and they are well aware of it. *But they are still the living present.* Sometimes they just need a ride or a phone call or a visit. Or an indication that in the grand scheme of our "future," they and their precious *past* contributions matter a whole lot to those of us who contemplate and constitute that future.

Rabbi Lester Bronstein