

Who are Our Real Strangers?

Parshat Vayera 5769

By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

A week ago, today, two tragic ‘deaths’ occurred in Suffolk County. One was Marcello Lucero, a 38 year old Ecuadorian who was attacked and killed by a gang of teens. And the second was Jeffery Conroy, a 17 year old Suffolk youth, who wielded the knife that led to the untimely death of Marcello. I say ‘two deaths’ because even though Jeff Conroy is alive and well, his life will never be the same. There’s a good chance that he will live out most, if not all, of his life behind bars. Any hopes and aspirations that he had for the future have been destroyed – not only for him but for his family as well.

Of course, Conroy is alive and Lucero is not. Eventually Jeff Conroy may even be freed from prison. And even if he isn’t, he can still enjoy life’s pleasures: three meals a day, reading a book, watching a movie, and exercising. He will become a ward of our government and you and I will pay to take care of him. Marcello’s mother, on the other hand, will never talk to her son again; whatever his life represented has been extinguished forever. Their pain will never go away.

Still, while I don’t know anything about Jeff Conroy’s family, I believe that there are two sets of grieving parents this week: a mother in a small town in Ecuador who is waiting to bury her son and a family in Suffolk County, pondering the tragedy of what took place a week ago.

Let there be no mistake about it: Jeff Conroy and his six friends are not monsters; it would be easier if we could say they were. They are typical American boys. They attended high school, played on the varsity teams and did all the stupid things teenage boys are known to do. Some of them even have Hispanic roots which makes this incident all the more mystifying. The boys were not so different from the teens who attend Oceanside High School. But they were filled with enough hate to destroy a life. As a result, none of their lives will ever be the same.

Of course, the issue here is more complex. America struggles with the question of illegal immigrants and their status in our society. What responsibility do we have to care for those who entered our country without the proper papers and status? How should we treat such people as a society? I wonder how aware these boys were of the anti-immigration sentiments of county executive, Steve Levy. Maybe not, but certainly they were surrounded by people who elected Levy precisely because of his anti immigration stand. Words shape a society and I suspect that they did not come up with their attitude on their own. To quote the song from South Pacific:

You have to be taught, before it's too late.
 Before you are six or seven or eight
 to hate all the people your relatives hate.
 You have to be carefully taught.

But illegal immigration is not really the question here is it? The Suffolk seven did not ask Marcello if he was an illegal or where he came from or what he was doing in America. They chose him simply because

he spoke Spanish, and because his skin was a little darker than theirs or simply because he was different from them. He was a stranger and that was enough reason to attack and kill him.

Our Torah portion this morning depicts two incidents involving the treatment of strangers: one takes place in the home of Abraham and the other in the city of Sodom. We find contrasting visions of how we treat the stranger in our midst and how our treatment is a measure of our humanity.

In the first incident, we find Abraham sitting in the entrance to his tent. Our forefather is healing from his recent circumcision. The sages tell us that this was the third day after his operation, the worst day in post-operative recovery. And then something strange happens! “The Lord appeared to Abraham at *Elonei Mamrei* while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot.” If God came to visit you, what would you say; what would you do? Certainly you’d pay attention to Him; but not our forefather, Abraham. Just over God’s shoulder, Abraham sees three strangers passing by. And he immediately gets up, leaves God standing there and runs to greet them.

Imagine: you’re standing in the presence of God but you run off to welcome three strangers who happen to be passing by. Does this sound strange to you? The sages tell us that Abraham was a model *Hachnasat Orchim*, hospitality. But hospitality is not about being a gracious host. It’s all about the way you welcome the stranger into your midst. It’s easy to be a gracious host when you are entertaining relatives or friends. Real hospitality is about how we welcome a stranger into our midst. Abraham brings these strangers to his tent, offers to bathe their feet, and immediately sees to the preparation of a meal. The rabbis take the Torah at its word: Greeting a stranger is greater than standing in the presence of the *Shechinah*, the divine presence.

Two chapters later we read the antithesis of this story. When Abraham’s mysterious visitors show up in Sodom, Lot invites them home. And while he is not quite as gracious as his uncle, Abraham, he too provides a place to rest, a good meal and all the comforts of home.

But the people of Sodom will not hear of it. They surround Lot’s home and demand that they turn over his guests. They will not tolerate strangers in their midst. And when Lot refuses, they say: “This fellow came here as an alien and already he acts like a ruler; now we will deal worse with you than with them!”

The story of Sodom is not just about the outsider, the passerby who is treated with suspicion and contempt. No matter how long Lot had been living in Sodom he was still a stranger. The question here was not legal or illegal but us versus them, stranger versus familiar. Sodom is wicked because there is no place for the diversity in this city.

In my weekly Table Torah Talk this week, I discussed a statement from *Pirke Avot* which is somewhat surprising. We are told that there are four types of human characteristics: there is the pious person who says ‘what is mine is yours and what is yours is yours;’ the wicked person who says ‘what is mine is mine and what is yours is mine;’ the fool who says ‘what is yours is mine and what is mine is yours;’ and finally, the common person, who says ‘what is mine is mine and what is yours is yours.’ This is something of a *Laissez-faire* attitude. I suspect this is how most of us exist in the world: live and let live.

For the sages, however, this is not acceptable attitude. The statement in *Pirke Avot* says that while this may be the attitude of the common person, others suggest that this is the character of Sodom. “What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours.” There is no room in this attitude for compassion or gracious or kindness to others. It is built on a premise of self interest and apathy to others. Such a person is indifferent – and indifference is worse than wickedness because it allows wickedness to proliferate and

grow. Long before Jeff Conroy took a knife and attacked an immigrant there was a community that taught him that we have no responsibility to others; that strangers are not to be trusted; that we do not need to care about the people around us if they do not look or speak like us. It is only a step from, “What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours,” to “What is mine is mine and everyone else can go to hell.”

Jeff Conroy and his friends are our problem. Like it or not, their attitude is all around us. I hear it in the people who say ‘NIMBY’ – ‘Not in my back yard.’ And I see it in the distrust that we show toward others. I read about it almost every day in the newspaper and in magazines. But somehow we think that it is only our problem when the intolerance is directed at us. The stranger in our midst is the measure of our humanity. How we treat the other says something about who we are.

Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonye, a Hasidic teacher and student of the Baal Shem Tov, once said that Abraham provides us with the true measure of righteousness. A Tzaddik is a person who sits in the entrance to his tent. His face is turned outward and not inward. What matters are not the things he has already done but the ones he can still do. He sees the world and greets the people around him at all times. His deeds are turned outward and not inward. And he greets God in the way he greets the stranger and the passerby.

Two tragic deaths occurred this week – but the question is whether we will learn a lesson from them....

Shabbat Shalom