



This week we begin the book of Exodus. Just a few verses in, we read:

וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ־חָדָשׁ עַל־מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדָע אֶת־יוֹסֵף:

*“A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase...”(Ex. 1:8-10)*

And so began our 400 years of enslavement. This new king clearly has forgotten that Joseph, an Israelite, had saved Egypt from famine. It is not an empty cliché that “those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it.” Remembering our past is one of the most often repeated Mitzvot: As Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi wrote in his book *Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*,

the Hebrew Bible’s “injunctions to remember are unconditional, and even when not commanded, remembrance is always pivotal.” Altogether the *Zachor* appears in its various forms 169 times in the Hebrew Bible, and we remember the Exodus from Egypt every shabbat in the Kiddush.

And the thing we are most mandated to remember is that we were strangers in Egypt. We are to remember that so that we can fulfill Exodus’s commandment not to wrong or oppress the stranger. (Ex. 23:9) So that we can go a step further and fulfill Deuteronomy’s commandment to love the stranger.(Dt. 10:19) The most repeated of any commandment, it is echoed 36 times in the Torah. We say in our Shabbat morning liturgy that welcoming the stranger is an “obligation without measure, whose reward too is without measure.”

On Yom Kippur, 2017, I spoke about this mitzvah: I recounted some of Mount Zion’s long history of welcoming the stranger:

- In 1882, when 200 refugees arrived in St. Paul, Mount Zion came to their aid.

- A few years later the women of Mount Zion founded Neighborhood House, and we continue our affiliation with it to this day.
- In the early 1980's we sponsored 4 Southeast Asian refugee families.
- In the 90's we established a New Americans committee.
- Every summer until Covid Mount Zion became a Project Home overflow shelter for families seeking refuge from the street.
- We signed on to the Union for Reform Judaism's Brit Olam, which calls on us to defend the rights of immigrants at risk of deportation.
- We joined the HIAS Welcome Campaign, making a commitment to do refugee and immigrant justice work because as their literature noted, "Once, we helped refugees because they were Jewish. Today we help refugees because we are Jewish."

And now, it seems, in the words of Yogi Berra, it's "Deju vu all over again." No matter where we stand politically, our mandate as Jews is calling us once again to remember the stranger.

In the coming days and weeks, we will be hearing of many opportunities to remember the stranger, and we can each act within our own capabilities and gifts, in large ways or small. But we are not at liberty to turn away. The stranger needs us, and "we know the feelings of the stranger for we were strangers in Egypt.

There's a Hassidic story about a rabbi who asked his students, "How do you know when the night has passed, and the day is on its way back?" The first student answered, "Could it be when you can look at an animal in the distance and tell if it is a goat or a sheep?" "No," answered the rabbi. Another student thought that perhaps it was when you could look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it was a fig tree or an apple tree, but that also was not right. "When is it then?" the students demanded. "It is when you look on the face of any person and see a friend. Until you can do this, then no matter what time it is it will always be night."

May God help us to bring on the dawn.