

The year ending has been the year of “the stranger.” Immigration. Presidential candidates vie to see who can promise the tallest, longest wall, or implant the most sophisticated tracking chip, or expel the largest number of illegal aliens.

Europe. This has surely been the summer of the stranger. Refugees from Syria and Isis risk life and limb to seek not just a better life, but a life where every day is not a brush with death.

This year, we Jews have been strangers to one another. The debate over the Iran deal has provoked a rarely seen level of hostility. Make no mistake. Jewish history is filled with division: Sadducees vs. Pharisees; Hasidim vs. Mignagdim; Labor Zionists vs. Religious Zionists. From each conflict we can read words one Jew says about another, words that would curl your hair. We’d like to think we are past that. We are not. It’s like the Civil War; families divided. Strangers to one another in our own family and we shall pursue this on Yom Kippur.

This morning. Different strangers.

This has been the year of Ferguson, Missouri; of Eric Garner in Staten Island, Eric Harris in Oklahoma, Walter Scott in North Carolina. More woeful disparity in income and education and incarceration. Complicated matters. But we cannot deny the evidence. Racism continues in our society. We have a problem with the stranger.

The Torah has a good deal to say about the stranger. That's odd. The Torah is a narrative that builds toward something. It takes us from the birth of our people with Abraham, to our descent to Egypt with Jacob, and 400 years later, to Moses bringing us up out of Egypt, spending forty years working on our identity as a people until we earn the right to settle in the land. We cross over the Jordan River; we have arrived.

The Torah is all about us becoming us. Yet, so often, the Torah mentions the stranger.

Half a century ago John Howard Griffin embarked upon a journalistic adventure. Born in Texas, raised in France, served in the South Pacific. And in the late 50s, the situation of southern blacks captured his interest.

He wanted to understand them and their lives and he wanted to do it in a way more profound and meaningful than any writer before. There was only one way to do that. He had to become black. A decade earlier, Sinclair Lewis explored this idea in *Kingsblood Royal*, as did Laura Z. Hobson in *A Gentleman's Agreement*. But those were novels. Griffin wanted to do it for real.

He went to New Orleans. He consulted with a dermatologist. He dyed his skin so dark friends no longer recognized him. For six weeks he travelled from Louisiana to Georgia, living as person of color. The result, an unforgettable book, *Black Like Me*.

We can imagine what Griffin experienced. But the way he writes, he makes us feel what he felt. He is one of us. Living, as one of them. Living as a stranger, he experienced having to plan ahead to use the restroom. Living as a stranger, he had to plan ahead where to get a drink or eat. Living as a stranger, he endured people who do not know him feeling free to call him names or order him about.

Griffin closed the book, saying: “If...we judge each man by his quality as an individual, my life as a black John Howard Griffin would not be greatly changed...I learned almost immediately, no one was judging me by my qualities as a man and everyone was judging me by my pigment.”

Yes, that was a long time ago, and far away. But it wasn't that long ago, and it wasn't that far away.

We skip ahead five decades to what some critics have called the literary event of the year, the just published *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates. The short book is a letter to Coates' teenage son, Samori. Coates tells Samori what his son needs to understand as a black man in America.

Coates writes for *The Atlantic*, grew up in Baltimore and attended Howard University. He loved Howard. Having grown up in an intellectual home, he could submerge himself in the acquisition of knowledge in the classroom and the library. But

also, as he tells us, because it was the one place he could forget he was black. It was the one place where race did not matter.

He explains to Samori the anxiety that was his constant companion on the streets of Baltimore, scared of the gangs, scared of the police, scared all the time. He keeps returning to the image of bodies, the bodies of black men and women, exploited through slavery and segregation, bodies on which, in so many ways, our nation is built, and today, which are threatened, lock up and murdered out of all proportion.

Coates' words remind us of Mayor Bill de Blasio's words of warning to his son Dante. De Blasio told an interviewer, "With Dante, very early on, we said, 'Look, if a police officer stops you, do everything he tells you to do. Don't move suddenly. Don't reach for your cellphone.' "Because we knew there's a greater chance it might be misinterpreted because he was a young man of color."

The father of Samori and the father of Dante send their son's the same message: In this place, you are a stranger.

A few weeks ago I had breakfast with a friend, an African American attorney in his mid-40s, prominent in New Jersey. In previous months I had reread *Black Like Me*, read some James Baldwin, and finished up with Ta-Nehisi Coates. I was shaken up by what I had read as well, of course as by the news to which we were all exposed. In addition, I recently joined the local NAACP chapter. I did not expect our meetings to be

encounter sessions, but what I heard rattled me. I needed a reality check.

We settled in over our eggs at the Ritz. I told him briefly what I had been up to. I asked him, what do you think?

He was quiet for a beat, and then he said, "I'm lucky. Grew up in a great home where I learned discipline and responsibility, got an outstanding education at superb universities. I've got a wonderful marriage and a wonderful family and a rewarding career. In so many ways, race is as irrelevant to me. But every hour of the day I am aware that I am black."

He's a respected, accomplished, affluent member of society. And still, he's a stranger.

In 1963 our own Rabbi Joachim Prinz spoke at the March on Washington. So much progress since then. But still....

The Torah delves into the question of the stranger. And that doesn't make sense. The Torah is about us. Israelites. Jews. Connecting to one another. Standing strong with one another. Why all this talk about stranger?

There shall be one law for the citizen and for the stranger who dwells among you.

The Lord upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing.

You shall not wrong the stranger or oppress him, for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt.

Nice sentiments? Or are they something more?

The rabbis of the Talmud debated no question more vigorously than why the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. They did not accept that it was simply that they were puny and weak while Rome was enormous and powerful. That's not the way they thought. They had to have done something so awful that this was their punishment.

They arrived at a conclusion. *Sinat hinam*. Hatred without basis. The debilitating rifts among the people themselves created the opportunity for Rome to enter, and plunder, and destroy. The Jews did not love each other enough to keep the Romans out.

Of all the Torah's statements about strangers, the most important is this from Deuteronomy: "You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Interesting. Not you shall like the stranger, or you shall respect the stranger, or you shall be kind to the stranger. You shall love the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt!

It is natural to love those of our own family, or own community, our own people. But loving the stranger does not come easily. He is different from us. We may not be comfortable with him. He is a stranger. And that is why we are commanded to love him.

It is tempting to think the Torah commands this as a way of ensuring compassion, and perhaps even empathy. We were strangers in Egypt.

But there's more. The Torah commands this for the simple reason that the best world in which we can live is the one where we love our own and we love the stranger. When all love one another; all benefit.

Loving the stranger is a challenge because the stranger is a stranger. How do we love someone we do not understand? How do we love someone we do not know? How do we love someone we may even fear?

I grew up playing jazz. My small college had a large percentage of black students. I live in Montclair. I spend a lot of time in Newark. I have many black friends. You do too. But in so many ways, they are still strangers.

We cannot change the world ourselves. But we can have an impact on our corner of it.

In the year ahead, Temple B'nai Abraham and the NAACP embark on an adventure. We begin the evening of October 11, with Senator Booker as our guest, when we and the NAACP together we will present a showing of I Shall Not be Silent, the documentary about our Rabbi Prinz. Then we'll talk.

We are going to have a candid conversation. Not a campfire-singing along. No kumbaya. What are the resentments the black community has? In what ways do they feel marginalized by the community at large, and perhaps by the Jewish community in particular.

And we can ask why the black community seems to care so little about the issues that are important to us. Israel. High, high taxes which support some of the highest per pupil spending the country with little to show for it.

I participate in more feel-good events than I can count. We're still strangers. Tell me about you. I'll tell you about me. We'll talk. And we'll listen.

A few years ago, we began actively to recruit our own members as Big Brothers and Big Sisters for littles Newark. This year, we redouble those efforts.

There is no greater way I know for one person to change the life of another so quickly and so easily. A few hours a month. A movie. Bowling. Conversations over ice cream. Thousands of

children suffer for lack of positive adult role models. That's fancy talk. It means they have no mother or father.

But when a wonderful adult shows up who cares about them, spends time with them, develops a relationship with them...they do better in school, they are less anxious, they are optimistic about their future...and they are better prepared for that future. I'd call it a miracle...but over and over again, I've seen it happen.

Many of our members have already become Bigs. These Bigs and Littles...were strangers. They didn't look the same. The places they come from could not have been more different. They were filled with ignorance and misconceptions and even fears about one another's lives.

Bigs fulfill the mitzvah of loving the stranger like nobody else. They walk in the door and say teach me about you. Show me who you are, open your life to me, make me understand what makes you laugh and what makes you cry. Let me show you I can love you.

If you want to help someone...if you want to save someone...if you want to love the stranger...let me know.

“You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

In Sanhedrin we read: “Man strikes many coins from one die, and they are all alike. All people are different one from the other, but God struck them all in His image.

We are not to be the stranger. He is not to be us. Diversity is to be honored. But we still have to love one another and God commands us to love the stranger because it is not easy. If it were, there would be no commandment.

We may be scared of the stranger. He may threaten our welfare. We may well ask, if he cares so much about us, why doesn't he seek out us to love?

Good questions. Important questions. Irrelevant questions.

The Torah commands us to love the stranger. That's all we need to know. The Torah does not say it is easy; but it also doesn't say we can decline.

In the year ahead we pray for those things we always pray for at this moment. Prosperity. Good health for ourselves and our family. A world a peace.

And for 5776 let us add this. May this not be the year of the stranger. May we open our hearts to him. May we overcome fear and trepidation. Because we were in Egypt may we love the stranger with all our hearts. By year's end may we each be closer to the other. Shanah tovah.