Ger V'toshav: Strangers and Residents in a World That Needs Witnesses
Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple
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My first year of rabbinical school was the first time I went to Israel. I was planning to go on a Birthright trip in college but about a month before the trip the Second Intifada broke out and a bus was bombed and then my parents said, "no." After the intifada was over and after I was out of college I reapplied to birthright and they emailed me this response, "Dear Alumni, please give us money." I will acknowledge that I'm greatly simplifying their response, but I do so for the sake of a shorter sermon. As an aside, two years after I got their response I'm sitting in my apartment in Jerusalem working on a final for my liturgy class and I hear a "you've got mail" message and I checked my e-mail and it's birthright congratulating me on being accepted to this year's trip. I responded to them saying, "You'll never guess where I am right now…"

But ultimately the first time I went to Israel was when I was heading there for rabbinical school. I remember flying to Israel that first time wondering what it would feel like to be in my homeland, but also seeing everything for the first time, would I feel like a stranger, or would I feel at home? Thinking back now I realize how deeply Jewish those questions were - we've been asking questions like this forever. To which people do we belong? How do others see us? Are we insiders or outsiders? Do we dwell in the center of things, or forever at the margins? These are questions our people have asked for millennia, and they are questions I believe we are all facing and feeling in our kishkas right now.

In *Parashat Chayei Sarah*, when Abraham is negotiating the purchasing of a burial plot for Sarah, he says to the Hittites: *Ger v'toshav anochi imachem*— "I am a stranger and a resident among you." I am both a stranger in this land, but I am also a resident. How profound. I don't belong but I do at the same time. A paradox. And this paradox has defined us ever since: we are both at home and not at home, belonging and yet apart.

Now, when I say that we are a ger v'toshav some of you might be confused because in biblical and rabbinic law, a *ger toshav* is not a Jew at all, but a non-Jewish "resident alien." Someone who accepts the Seven Noahide Laws—the universal minimum of morality. Such a person was permitted to live among the Israelites, protected and supported, without converting. So originally, *ger v'toshav* meant someone living in-between: inside the community, yet not fully of it. Neither stranger nor citizen—somewhere between. But halachikally, it meant somone who was not Jewish but still part of our community

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, one of the great Jewish thinkers of the 20th century, took that halakhic term and turned it inward. He said: we, the Jewish people, are the *ger v'toshav* in history.

- In covenant, before God, we are insiders—*toshavim*—rooted in Torah, and mitzvot, with a unique destiny.
- In civilization, before the world, we are strangers—*gerim*—always a bit apart, carrying a moral vision that doesn't fully align with the societies around us.

Soloveitchik called this the "universalism of particularity." Our strangeness is not a curse but a calling. If we were only strangers, we would have nothing to offer; if only residents, we would vanish into assimilation. It is by being both that we fulfill our mission. This is why Abraham's self-description is so powerful. He is not merely negotiating land; he is naming the Jewish condition: forever both insider and outsider, particular and universal.

Yesterday morning, our Torah reading told the story of the Binding of Isaac. Abraham leads his son up the mountain. A knife is raised. And then—a ram, caught in the thicket, becomes the substitute.

The Talmud asks: *Why do we blow a ram's horn on Rosh Hashanah?* And it answers: so that God may remember the binding of Isaac and see it as if we were him. The ram becomes the symbol of covenantal continuity.

But the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai adds to the story as he claims that the real hero of the Binding of Isaac was the ram and that after he was slaughtered his horns were used to make the first shofarot. Their blasts reminded God and us of the covenant, but also of the injustice in the world, for the ram was unaware of what was going on and was volunteered to die without a voice.

For Amichai, the ram is the ultimate *ger v'toshav*: caught, voiceless, substituted, yet transformed into a cry that echoes through generations. Neither the chosen patriarch nor the promised son, but the one whose suffering becomes memory and warning.

To live as *ger v'toshav* is to live like that ram: aware of the cost, aware of our in-betweenness, yet willing to let our cry resound as a call to justice.

At the March on Washington, Rabbi Joachim Prinz declared: *"Neighbor is not a geographic term. It is a moral concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of [a person's] dignity and integrity."*

Prinz, who had fled Nazi Germany, knew that Jews could not abandon either part of their identity. Our apartness obligates us to act for universal dignity. To forget our strangeness is to forget our calling.

So what does it mean for us, today, to live as *ger v'toshav* in America? The first is to remember the stranger. The Torah reminds us time and again: "You were strangers in Egypt." Because we know what it means to be vulnerable, we are called to empathy: for refugees, immigrants, those on the margins, those who are othered and are at risk.

The second is to build as residents. Abraham insisted on paying full price for the Cave of Machpelah. He would not accept the burial plot as a gift. To be *toshav* is to invest, to build institutions of justice, to strengthen democracy. We are not guests; we are builders. To be a Jew in America today is not only to respond to brokenness, but to build something beautiful.

It means cultivating Jewish rhythms in a society that doesn't always recognize them — lighting Shabbat candles in a world that doesn't pause, building a sukkah in the shadow of skyscrapers, choosing to gather for a Yom Kippur fast when the world just keeps moving.

It means study — not just for children, but for all of us. Opening our sacred texts. Arguing with them. Wrestling with what they ask of us. Allowing their wisdom to guide our decisions, even — especially — when it challenges us.

It means prayer — not just reciting words but engaging in practices that open our hearts. That give us language for gratitude and grief, for joy and doubt.

It means building community — choosing to be in relationship with other Jews, even when it's complicated. Especially when it's complicated.

To live as a Jew in America today is to plant ourselves in soil that is often unfamiliar and still choose to bloom from our roots.

The third is to witness with the shofar's cry. Like the ram, our role is to give voice. To sound the alarm against injustices and atrocities. To speak for human dignity everywhere. To refuse silence.

And yet, today that tension is sharper than ever.

Some voices want us to dissolve into generic identity politics, just another minority among minorities. Others want us to retreat, to give up, or to go to some other place or to stop existing. Both are temptations. But both are wrong.

Soloveitchik insists: our mission is to hold both. To be particular and universal, to live our covenant and to serve humanity. To be a stranger and a resident.

It is not easy. It is not comfortable. But it is who we are. We are children of Abraham and Sarah, heirs to Sinai, and residents of New Jersey. We are part of Israel, part of America, and part of a world that aches for healing.

And the task of Rosh Hashanah is to hear the ram's horn and ask: What will we do with this identity? How will we live as *gerim v'toshavim*?

- Will we care for the vulnerable, remembering we too were and are strangers?
- Will we build resilient communities, investing in justice and peace?
- Will we let our voices cry out, not only for our people but for all humanity?

When Abraham called himself *ger v'toshav anochi imachem*, he was not just bargaining for a grave. He was naming the Jewish condition for all time. To be Jewish is to live in duality. To be at home and not at home. To be particular and universal. To be a resident alien. And it is in that strangeness that our sacred gift lies: the gift of conscience, of memory, of witness.

So on this Rosh Hashanah, may we embrace that paradox. May we teach our children to live with both feet in different worlds. May we act with empathy, with commitment, and with courage. And may the cry of the ram awaken us—not only to who we are, but to who we are called to be.

Amen