

Temple Aliyah
Shavuot 2017 Sermon Slam
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I'm a mentor. I meet weekly with my mentee, Vanessa, over watery coffee and muffins in the cafeteria of MassBay Community College. There, we scheme and strategize about how Vanessa might parlay her success at MassBay, where she recently graduated with an associate's degree in business and a management certificate, into enrollment in a 4-year college. That's what Vanessa wants more than anything – a degree from a 4- year college.

Upsides: Vanessa is driven and smart. She works hard and focuses on her goals. Although she's virtually alone in the world, she endears herself to people with her radiant smile and refusal to feel sorry for herself. She's been accepted at Suffolk University, Stonehill College, and Northeastern.

Downsides: Vanessa has temporary protected status, or TPS. She fled the collapsed buildings and dust-filled air of post-earthquake Haiti at age 15, eight years ago, into the waiting arms of Miss Liberty, whose arms are now poised like springs ready to propel Vanessa back to her own shores in six months time.

Meeting with Vanessa has caused me to ponder the nature of welcoming the stranger. Welcoming guests into our homes, opening our tents to others, inviting the stranger to share the Passover seder – these are basic tenets of Judaism as I understand it. When a traveler comes to your neighborhood or town, when a person is sick or lost or hungry or impoverished, and has nowhere to go, we are to open our doors, our arms, and our hearts to welcome them.

But what if this stranger, this houseguest, stays awhile? We may have to make more frequent trips to the grocery to keep the fridge stocked. Over time, we notice the stranger taking up the rhythms of our own lives, making accommodations to our needs and daily schedule, and quietly asking us to do the same. Over the course of a stranger's stay she starts to become a bit more like us, and a bit less like a stranger.

My mentee, Vanessa, entered Brighton High as a 15-year-old sophomore, and spent her formative high school years in America. Most of her family and all of her friends live here. Her high school guidance counselor told her she could never go to college because of her temporary status but she applied and was accepted anyway. She worked nights for two long years and singlehandedly paid her MassBay foreign student tuition. Even in her few years here, by her actions Vanessa has pledged herself to American language, customs, and values. I'm reminded of Ruth's words when her daughter-in-law urged her to return to her own people and her own god. "Entreat me not to leave thee, and to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God."

The truth is, we can welcome strangers, and we should, but that stranger ultimately has no control and can always be asked or forced to leave. As Americans and as Jews, we need to find a way to not only welcome strangers, but to discuss and try to define the point at which they are no longer strangers but have become one of us, and then accept them into the fold, permanently.