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*Bronfman Torah: commentary on the Torah that draws on the lives, skills, and insights of our community*

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# A Passage from *Ger* to *Toshav*

Malka Himelhoch '15 | Bronfman Torah | Behar-Bechukotai 2017

*Malka Himelhoch (Bronfman '15) is a student on the Princeton Bridge Year program in India. She's been thinking a lot recently about how much you must love someone to build them a Taj Mahal.*

As the Torah lays out the rules of yovel year, the jubilee on the 50<sup>th</sup> year when all slaves must be freed and all land reverted to its original owner, the Torah tells the Jewish people that they must support both the *ger*, the stranger, and the *toshav*, one who lives among you. In Leviticus 25:35 we read, “If your brother become impoverished and his means falter in your midst, you shall strengthen him – stranger (*Ger*) or resident (*Toshav*) – so that he can live with you.”

I first learned this verse in my orthodox elementary school when I was eight. My teacher used this verse to teach about our obligation to other Jews -- the *toshav*, those who live among us. But the verse says that we have an obligation both to the stranger and the resident. In fact, in the text the *ger* is mentioned first, emphasized; while the *toshav*, or the resident, could be considered an afterthought.

There has been much discussion among commentators, both classical and contemporary, over the implications of this verse. There is so much need in the world. For those of us in a position to help, those of us with education and means and supportive families and homes, where do we begin to assist others? Do we

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look first to our own local communities, to the Jewish community at home and abroad, or do we go where our heart tells us we can make the most difference? And what, in our reading of the above verse, really constitutes a stranger and a resident? In considering our obligation to others, can the two be synonymous? Indeed, can the two be embodied in ourselves?

I've been in India for the past eight months, and for the first time in my life I've truly been a *ger*, a stranger. Always before, I've been able to pass. I can pass as an American and I can pass as an Israeli. When I walk in the streets in both those countries nobody looks twice at me. But for the past eight months I haven't been able to go anywhere without people trying to take covert "selfies" with me or asking where I'm from. I'm a tall white girl in India and under no circumstances would I ever be able to pass even if I spoke fluent Hindi and understood all the cultural rules and customs (which I don't). It's painfully obvious to me every moment of every day that I am a *ger*.

I came to India to learn about an ancient culture which is not my own. I came with the hope that I would be able to help those who were strangers to me. Yet, every day when I walk into Asha Deep (the NGO school where I have been teaching for the last eight months, in the slum next to where I live), I struggle with why I am here. Why didn't I help people who live twenty minutes away from me in D.C.? Why didn't I volunteer with students in America who struggle with many of the same problems that my kids here struggle with? They struggle with poverty, with inadequate educational opportunities, with overwhelmed and overworked parents, with hunger, with violence. Those children, in D.C., speak my language, live in some cases just a train ride -- and in other cases, just a walk -- away from my comfortable suburban home in Silver Spring, Maryland. They are my *toshav*, the people in my midst who are in need of my compassion and assistance. So, why did I fly as far across the world as I could get in order to volunteer?

The truth is, given the differences in our circumstances, the children in D.C. are as much strangers to me as the children I work with every day in India. Their lives are fundamentally different from mine, their concerns are foreign to me even though we live twenty minutes from each other. In order to bring myself closer to them, I believe that I first had to become a stranger myself in order to get a better grasp of what it means to strengthen and support a *ger*.

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Here, in Varnasi, India, I was welcomed. I lived among wonderful, kind, loving people. My two host sisters, Kriti and Sriste, tell me every day that I have four sisters now: two in America (my biological sisters) and two in India. In the classes that I teach in Hindi, my students laugh at me and correct my grammar but hug me at the end of each lesson. In the street I am still a stranger, stared at, laughed at. But in the school where I work I am Mallika Ma'am, and in my home in Varnasi I am Deedee (big sister). The people here turned me from a *ger* into a *toshav*. Yes, I'm sure I could have learned this lesson in D.C. But at the end of the day, I wasn't ready to work in a school twenty minutes from home. I wasn't prepared to reach out to my neighbor when I felt that they were *gerim* to me. Until I found myself in the position of both a stranger and a resident simultaneously, I couldn't quite figure out my approach to those in need in the world I come from. Being both a *ger* and a *toshav* in India, I think that I will better be able to go back home to Silver Spring, MD and find a common language with, and a sense of compassion for, those in my own world who feel so far away and yet live so close. It is my obligation to "strengthen" them, so they can live "in my midst," just as I have been "strengthened" by those with whom I have lived in Varnasi.

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Continue the conversation. Send Malka your thoughts: [malka.himelhoch@gmail.com](mailto:malka.himelhoch@gmail.com).

P.S.: We're always looking for more *dvar torah* writers. Interested? Contact [stefanie@byfi.org](mailto:stefanie@byfi.org). We look forward to hearing from you.



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