

Close To Home: Parashat Va-era

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Soon after Russian troops invaded Ukraine, those of us at WJCS who work with Holocaust survivors and their children saw a wave of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder responses in those clients. One woman, who as a small girl had been evacuated to Kazan, beyond the German lines, told me, “As soon as I turned on the television, and saw those people huddling in the Kiev Metro, I couldn’t stop remembering being in a shelter. My mother and I listened to the bombs, and did not know where my father was.” We heard dozens of other stories like that, often spoken through tears. As we gathered and pondered those stories, it became clear to us that, because of the place this war was happening, with its particular landscape, the look of its village roads, and the faces of the people in the shelters, it hit our clients close to home.

The vast majority of our survivor community felt deep empathy for the Ukrainians, despite fully understanding that some of them, in dire need of help of all kinds from abroad, were the direct descendants of Nazi collaborators. The speedy and generous response from the global Jewish community—from Federations, JCC’s and synagogues in North America, from Israeli medical and relief teams, from JCC’s and Chabad Houses in the countries bordering Ukraine, all of whom helped anyone and everyone fleeing the war, irrespective of nationality or religion—confirmed that we Jews were almost completely united in a collective desire to respond to this crisis. As Jews, we had been waiting for an opportunity to make a deep and needed gesture of forgiveness. And so, we welcomed them.

This week’s Torah reading, Va’era, is traditionally regarded as the just-so story for why we practice the mitzvah of hakhnasat orchim, of welcoming guests, especially strangers, into our homes. Our parashah opens with Abraham “sitting at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day.” Why, Rashi asks, is Abraham sitting there? Because he’s scanning the horizon

for “wayfarers, who might be passing through or returning (shav), so he can invite them into his home.” Visitors do indeed appear. Abraham implores them to come in and stay for a meal, which Sarah rushes to prepare. From their example, our Rabbis teach, we should learn to do the same.

Rabbi Yosef Patzanowski of Ger, also known as the Pardes Yosef (19th Century) amplifies Rashi’s interpretation, pointing out that the mitzvah of welcoming the stranger should be enacted as an ongoing process, rather than as a one-time event. Interpreting Rashi’s statement that wayfarers would “return”, he writes: “Abraham would sit at the entrance of his tent to bring in anew those who were returning.” In other words, we must keep in mind that it often takes a guest time to feel at home. Trust, friendship, and home take time to build. Our goal is to open doors, not create revolving ones.

Our Westchester Jewish community has committed itself to the long haul of welcoming Ukrainians seeking refuge. Many Jewish families—most notably, those of immigrants from the Former Soviet Union—have taken in Ukrainian people to live with them in their homes. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the Westchester Jewish Coalition on Immigration, and numerous synagogues are supporting Welcome Circles comprised of individuals who are putting their shoulders into the groundwork needed for an extended welcome. I am proud to announce that Westchester Jewish Community Services and the WJCI have partnered on a Resettlement Program to offer a support group, to help with immigration status and other services, to ensure that those Ukrainians who are here temporarily can feel at home, and those whose home will be here can successfully build a life. We cannot forget that Ukrainians are not the only people in the world right now who are fleeing danger. But we have to start somewhere. We hope that the “close to home” emotions which stirred our community to action in the rescue of Ukrainians will only strengthen our resolve to come to the aid of others. As Sir Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l wrote in *The Dignity of Difference*, “The universality of moral concern is not something we learn by being universal but by being particular. Because we know what it is to be a parent, loving our children. Thus, we understand what it is for someone else, somewhere else, to be a parent, loving his or her children. There is no road to human solidarity that does not begin with moral particularity - by coming to know what it means to be a child, a parent, a neighbour, a friend.

We learn to love humanity by loving specific human beings. There is no short-cut.”

The upshot is that we should act, and not delay. If the crisis in Ukraine rouses your feelings in a way that other crises have not, so be it. Get involved. Start close to home.