



## Stranger in the Family

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*Contact with the stranger, with the one who is not one of us, in no way jeopardizes the unity and the strength that binds us together, but, on the contrary, brings us closer together by shedding light on our own separateness, and leaves us richer than we were before giving.*

**T**ime and time again the Bible makes reference to the stranger and the need to be hospitable. The family in the Bible is often seen welcoming the stranger in its midst. We remember Abraham and his three guests, Lot and the angels, etc. The homogeneity of the family is often articulated, in the Bible, with the heterogenous presence of the stranger. The role of the family in the Bible is not reduced to the upbringing of the progeny, nor is it merely a solace for those present. The family is also a haven for the stranger.

Interestingly, the act of hospitality not only preserves the stranger from harm, but plays a primordial role in preserving the family itself. Saving the stranger from outside desolation amounts to saving the family from internal dissolution or waste. The stranger has a threefold beneficial role: the stranger is a mirror, the stranger is a promise, but the stranger is also a reminder.

### **The stranger: a mirror**

The way a community treats its strangers reflects the way this community treats its own. A society that wants nothing to do with strangers does not care well for its own members. Indifference towards the stranger reflects the indifference the members of that society have for each other. A family that cannot welcome the stranger is a family indifferent to its own members.

The relationship a family holds with the stranger reflects also its relationship with God. In the Bible, God often hides behind the face of the stranger. It was God, in the guise of three men, who met Abraham under the trees of Mamre (Genesis 18). It is God who hides behind the hungry, thirsty and naked that Christians are to assist (Matthew 25:44). God takes the features of the stranger because, like the stranger, he is the absolutely Other. Family members that do not see the stranger are incapable of recognizing the otherness of God, and are praying to a god

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that is only the reflection of their own concerns. Such a family thinks it is engaged in daily communion with God, but in fact it is engaged in a monologue with the god of its own device.

The way a family welcomes a stranger reflects the way its members relate to each other and the way they relate to God. The suspicion a family holds towards strangers is but the symptom that something is not right within its own midst. But the role of the stranger is not limited to the present diagnostic of a family's climate. The stranger is often, in the Bible, the custodian of a promise.

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**The stranger: a promise**

The strangers in the Bible never leave without a blessing. The three men hosted by Abraham leave him with the promise of a son. The strangers hosted by Lot save his life. Paradoxically, the host-families in the Bible receive much more than they give. A striking example of this is the story of the widow who hosted the prophet Elijah. She had but some oil and flour to offer him, but what she had was multiplied to sufficiency for the whole time of famine.

Families who welcome strangers into their midst will receive more than they give out. It is by giving that one receives. The stranger's insight, wisdom and experience enrich the host-family. A family that receives no strangers is

condemned to atrophy. It is bound to crumple and die. It is the stranger who brings new dynamics to the family. A family closed up on itself will sooner or later asphyxiate and die. It needs the stranger to open it up to new horizons, new alternatives, a new life. But the stranger plays yet a deeper role by reminding the family members of their own original condition as strangers.

**The stranger: a reminder**

In the Bible, the commandment of hospitality comes with a reminder of one's own history of alienation: "the stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:34, NKJV).

The presence of the stranger reminds each member of the family of its past of solitude and exile. The natural cohesion of the family is momentarily suspended as each member reflects on its own estrangement. The presence of the stranger, for the space of a second, establishes an incommensurable distance between the members of the family: each becomes a stranger to the other. The presence of the stranger sheds a mysterious light on each face.

The cohesion of the family is suddenly broken to reveal the otherness of each of its members. The stranger, by his/her presence, has revealed to the family the forgotten dimension of otherness so quickly worn out by the monotony of everyday companionship. And by revealing the distance between family members, the stranger succeeds in reigniting their interest and desire for each other. For desire is only possible in a state of separation, a state which Shmuel

Trigano refers to as the "desert of love." For there to be love between two people, they must be separate. When the distance is abolished, when there is no "other" left, it is not love, but narcissism. For one to truly love the other, without dissolving that other into oneself, one must recognize his utter "strangeness." This is what the presence of the stranger helps us to remember: the otherness of each of the family members. Before the arrival of the stranger, we were one, bored and annoyed with each other. Now, we remember that each of us is a stranger to the other, irreducible to the family name.

The family therefore benefits from the threefold contribution of the stranger: a mirror, a promise, and a reminder. The welcoming of the stranger is essential to the very survival of the family. The act of hospitality is the very nerve of the family. Welcoming the stranger is essential to its being-there. The cohesiveness of a group, of a community, is the measure of its capacity of welcoming heterogenous elements. This brings a new insight for Jewish-Christian dialogue. We now know that contact with the

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