

**February 20, 2009**

***Shabbat Shalom!***

*The words “neighbor” and “stranger” have become relative terms in our world that can be connected from one end to the other almost instantly. On February 19, President Barack Obama and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper met as neighbors. Think of the many countries that neighbor each other in the world where the term “stranger” would better describe their relationship – or, more correctly, their lack of ties.*

*What is it that makes someone a “neighbor” or a “stranger”? Is a neighbor necessarily someone who lives near us, or could it be a friend who lives tens to hundreds of miles away? Is a stranger someone from another geographical region, does that term apply to people whose religion, ethnicity, or political philosophy differ from our own?*

*“You shall not oppress or wrong a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” This refrain from the Torah, stated in many different ways, but all with the same message, teaches us to consider no one a stranger. All of us have been in a position where we were in unfamiliar surroundings and where we didn’t know even one person. Our memories of those who have reached out to us, to include us, are what lead us to do the same for any other person.*

*Israeli President Shimon Peres has asked Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu to form the next Israeli government. The possibility is great that Avigdor Lieberman and his Yisrael Beiteinu (“Israel is our Home”) party will be included in the ruling coalition. According to many observers and commentators, Lieberman’s call for a loyalty oath for all Israeli citizens during the recent campaign is intended to strip Israeli Arabs of their citizenship. The next unfortunate step in such a mindset would be to challenge the citizenship of anyone who would disagree with his views about what it means to be a loyal citizen. Such an approach ignores the possibility that criticism of government policies could be a patriotic act. With this perspective, the definition of who is a neighbor becomes increasingly narrow.*

*Yet, the Torah directs us to love both neighbor and stranger, and not to wrong or oppress anyone. These values should guide Israeli leaders in forming a coalition and, with teachings like these found in nearly every country and culture, there should be hope for an end to oppression around the world. When principle finds its way into policy, we will approach the vision of Psalm 85, of a world where “kindness and truth will meet, and justice and peace will embrace.”*

*Have a peaceful Shabbat.*

***-- L'shalom, Rabbi Larry K.***