



❖ **PROF. LEO LIEBERMAN, Jewish Times Staff Writer**

Talking To Strangers

When I was growing up, I remember how often I was told that I shouldn't talk to strangers and that I should be careful of anyone who wanted to start a conversation with me if I didn't know who that person was.

So, of course, I was always wary of forming relationships with those whom I did not know. And whenever we heard of a kidnapping (an event which really did not occur that often) it was really a topic for conversation for many weeks and always augmented the warning, "See you must never start up with strangers."

I can still hear that stern warning in my inner ears even though many years have certainly passed. And so there is a story that goes with this

admonition.

A few years ago I was invited by Yad VaShem, the leading Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, to come as a guest speaker. I was overjoyed to accept this invitation and prepared my talk, packed my bags and off we went to Israel and then to Jerusalem. After touring the city for a few days, it was time for me to appear at Yad VaShem for my presentation.

I came to the auditorium and was told that there would be men and women from over twenty countries who would be present to listen to me. Since I was a bit anxious (even nervous!) I arrived much earlier than I needed to and that's when I spotted him standing at the door. Although

he was a complete stranger, still he reminded me of so many of my students whom I meet each semester, except this young man was dressed in army garb and carried a rifle. (Rifles are not permitted in my class!) I approached him

thinking he was a security guard to inquire if the meeting was to take place in the auditorium and if he was guarding the place. He laughed and his smile lit up his tanned face. He

told me his name was Yakov and that he had come hoping to hear the talk by the professor from New Jersey

Unfortunately, he had no ticket so he wasn't certain he would be admitted. I told him not to worry, things would work out. And then we started a conversation and he revealed to me that his grandparents were survivors of Bergen Belsen and had "slipped" into Israel when it was just a new state, avoiding the British guards, just as they had gotten

past the Germans. They moved to Tel Aviv and started a home and raised a family.

His father was waiting at a bus stop near Netanya when a terrorist suicide bomber exploded himself and his father barely escaped with his

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life, although for many months he could not walk because of shrapnel in his leg.

But he continued to work so that his children could get a good education. As for Yakov, first he wanted to be a teacher and work with "difficult" children. (Yes, even in Israel, children can be "difficult.") Then after he was in the town of Sderot visiting his uncle a rocket from Gaza landed near the school where his nephew was playing.

Thankfully no one was hurt but he soon volunteered to work in Hadassah Hospital and began helping both Arab and Israeli children.

He looked at me and smiled

saying, "Children are children. Yes?" Here was a stranger and we were talking so openly. I ushered him into the auditorium despite his protests that I might get into trouble since he had no ticket.

I laughed and saw to it that he was seated. I said that I hoped that we could meet after the presentation and perhaps we could go out for coffee. I said, "Shalom!" and as I walked to the platform, I heard him say, "L'hitraot! Until we meet again."

Unfortunately at the end of the program I was surrounded by people and I lost sight of Yakov. He had simply merged into the crowd and I was not able to locate him.

When I was asked whom I was looking for I simply said, "Someone I just met - a friend." And I smiled inwardly as I remembered Mama's caution about strangers and being careful, but I knew that she would not include Yakov in this category because, after all, he was no longer a stranger, but had become a friend even though I realized our paths might not cross again.

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