

# The Ones Who Turn Up Along the Way

The super, the store manager, the repairman: we'll never meet for coffee, but our connections are real

By RABBI JENNIFER KRAUSE

**N**OT LONG AGO MY BUILDING super, Walter, stopped by my apartment. He rang the bell saying "Super," in a way to which I had grown accustomed, dragging out the "u" and adding a slight roll to the "r." I imagined that he was coming to fix something or maybe to bring me a package. But when I opened the door, he was holding the spare set of keys that he kept to my place.

Walter told me he had come to return the keys because he would no longer be working in my building. His family had

gotten too big for the basement apartment that came with the job, he explained. Walter had been there for 11 years, ever since coming to the United States from Colombia. He had been available at all hours for the occasional maintenance crisis, but, more important, he always gave me the sense that he looked out for me—which is a great comfort when you're living alone in Manhattan. It was hard to imagine the building without him.

Just before Walter came by, I had been unpacking groceries and reflecting on a conversation I had just had with Ali, the

manager of my neighborhood grocery store. Ali is a devout Muslim from Bangladesh. He has a wife and three children and a Ph.D. in geography. On visits to his native country, he often gives lectures on Islam. He hopes to publish a book encouraging Bangladeshi people to see Jews as friends. It's a project he has been working on for some time, and to which he feels even more committed since September 11. "This is what Allah tells me I must do," he says. "I must love all people. I cannot hate people and love Allah."

I have been shopping in this grocery store for years now, and Ali and I have always waved and said hello. But several months ago the hellos turned into conversation. When I told him that I am a rabbi, we began discussing the connections between Judaism and Islam, the purpose of religion, the sorrow and anger we feel when people use religion as a justification for violence. Every time we talk I feel as if I have learned Torah—the wisdom of my own faith tradition—from a man who quotes the Quran.

I share these stories because they are part of the puzzle of community. I am well

aware that Walter and Ali do not fall into the simple categories of family member, co-worker or friend. We are from different backgrounds, different countries, and we occupy different socioeconomic spheres. We don't go to each other's home for dinner or make plans to meet for coffee, and we probably won't. Our connections are site-specific and episodic. And yet they make real claims on my heart and mind.

In the Book of Exodus, even as God continued to harden Pharaoh's heart, the Israelites began their journey out of Egypt. More than 600,000 packed up and headed out on foot, but they were not alone. An *erev rav*—a mixed multitude—went with them. The ancient rabbis' reviews are mixed when it comes to characterizing this anonymous crew. Some see them as a group of hangers-on ultimately responsible for the building of the golden calf. Others suggest that they were Egyptians who simply shared the basic human longing to be free. Either way, I imagine that by the time the travelers made it to



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID N. BERWITZ

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shore and fanned out into the desert, called to different purposes and directions, they were bound to one another forever.

About a year ago, a guy came to replace the intercom system in my apartment. While he worked, he told me that he had been born in Ukraine, immigrated to Israel

with his family and fought in the country's 1948 independence war. He explained that he was an atheist and knew he could never believe in God. Nevertheless, as he was leaving he asked in Hebrew, "What blessing may I give you?" Before I could answer, he prayed that I would find my *bashert* (soulmate), kindly even suggesting one of his sons.

When he was gone I noticed that he had forgotten a bunch of different-colored wires. I saved them. I keep them in a tin with the quarters I use for doing laundry. They remind me that we are traveling not only with the people we have chosen but with the ones who turn up along the way. The repairman, Walter and Ali are part of my *erev rav*, and I am a part of theirs.

It's been months now since Walter and his family moved across the river to New Jersey. Soon Ali will take another trip to Bangladesh. I don't know what's next for me, but I know I won't be going alone.

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