

my JEWISH LEARNING

Recharge

Shabbat Reading to Refresh Your Soul

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Loving the Stranger

By Rachel Barenblat

Rabbis like me enjoy pointing out that the most-often repeated mitzvah in the Torah is the commandment to love the stranger. By some counts, the injunction is there 36 times — twice the numerical value of the Hebrew word chai, meaning life. As if to say: The way to aim “to life, to life” is to prioritize this particular mitzvah.

Our tradition teaches that nothing in Torah is superfluous. We must make meaning out of every letter. So surely there must be some reason this mitzvah is repeated so many times.

The first appearance of this commandment is found in Exodus, where it is expressed like this: “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 22:20) The initial injunction is a negative one: We are commanded not to wrong the stranger or oppress them. In Leviticus, it is phrased a little differently: “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I Adonai am your God.” (Leviticus 19:33) Here we are told to treat strangers among us like citizens and love them as ourselves. By the time we reach Deuteronomy, the mitzvah is simply to love the stranger: “Love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Deuteronomy 10:19)

If we understand Torah as the story of our growing-up as a people, we can see a trajectory in these verses. In Exodus, this mitzvah is given to newly freed slaves who may be emotionally and spiritually like children. So the Torah starts us off easy, with a mitzvah even a child could understand: Don’t be mean to a person you don’t know. This is the “everything I need to know, I learned in kindergarten” version of the mitzvah.

In Leviticus, we are a nation wandering in the wilderness. We’re moving out of childhood and into a rebellious adolescence. Think of the endless complaints of the wandering Israelites about the food and their longing for the delicacies available in Egypt. So the Torah ups the ante, telling us to treat the stranger like our own fellow citizens and to figure out how to love them. The verse is sealed with Torah’s equivalent of a parental because-I-said-so: “I Adonai am your God.”

By Deuteronomy, as we prepare to cross the river into the land of promise, the Torah assumes we’ve grown into ourselves spiritually and are ready to receive the mitzvah in its essential form: Just love the stranger. Period.

What does it mean to love the stranger? I don’t think the Torah is asking us here to notice a warm feeling in the heart and leave it at that. It is asking us to cultivate empathy, which is both deeper and more tangible than simple warm fuzzies. The clue is the clause that keeps repeating: “For you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Treating the stranger properly has something to do with remembering our own history of alienation.

The biblical commentator Rashi, in his comment to yet another expression of the commandment in Exodus 23:9, writes this: “You know the feelings of the stranger — how painful it is for him when you oppress him.” In asking us to remember the time when we as a people were strangers and were mistreated, he is channeling the famous adage attributed to Hillel: “What is hateful to you, do not do to another.” Or in the words of the contemporary biblical commentator Nechamah Liebowitz: “We are bidden to put ourselves in the position of the stranger by remembering how it felt when we were strangers in another land.”

The commandment to love the stranger puts me in mind of another mitzvah about love: the Veahavta, the passage we repeat in daily prayer instructing us to love God with all our heart and soul and might. As moderns, we may think of love as a feeling. But for our sages, love was an action. We enact our love for God by doing mitzvot, by acting ethically and justly, in ways that express care and compassion toward God's creations. We enact our love for the stranger the same way.

When these mitzvot were new, we lived in a far more insular world than we do now. The transnational migration of the modern era was unimaginable. But even then, people fled home for reasons of war, slavery or famine. Our biblical ancestors began their sojourn as strangers in Egypt because of famine, and the Torah reminds them (and us) of that because it's at the heart of how our tradition calls us to relate to strangers in every era.

In a few weeks, we will celebrate the holiday marking our liberation from slavery in Egypt. And we will begin our Passover seders by opening our doors and inviting all who are hungry to come and eat. Can we make those words more than a prayer? Just as many synagogues organize food drives in the days leading up to Yom Kippur, perhaps we could do something similar in advance of Passover. Those of us who purge our homes of leavened products prior to the holiday might consider donating those foods to food pantries.

Seven weeks later, we will again be reminded of the mitzvah to love the stranger when we read the Book of Ruth, the story of an immigrant who took refuge among our people and became the ancestor of King David. Some of us may be in a position akin to Ruth, in need of support. But those of us fortunate enough to be stable and comfortable can make sure those who are hungry can glean what they need. That's the spiritual nourishment I'm finding in these verses this year.

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It's Shabbat...

Smooth the edges.