

When my kids were in BJE preschool many years ago, they had a Passover assembly for parents and extended family. At the assembly, they played the song "Out of Egypt to Be Free," and along with the song, the kids marched, eventually they were to cross through the fake red sea towards the promised land. The kids, playing the role of the escaped slaves, carried bags, little backpacks, and they were given little dolls representing the baby Israelites, which they carried, or waved in the air, depending on the child. The 3-year-olds and teachers practiced this Out of Egypt march for weeks. When showtime came, some kids forgot the road map and cried, leaving the march. Others made their way to their parents, skipping the Red Sea altogether. It was, and remains, to Kyle and me, an absolutely hysterical reenactment of the exodus story. Occasionally, to this day, and at many a Passover seder, Kyle and I burst out in song, Out Out of Egypt to be free, while our now young adult children roll their eyes.

From a very early age, Jews are taught: we were once slaves, and then we were freed. It is our job to welcome the stranger.

Why is welcoming the stranger so central to who we are? Because it keeps our memory honest. It says: let what happened to us never happen through us. We carry a spiritual muscle memory of being outsiders.

Sometimes welcoming the stranger, even seeing the stranger, is inconvenient. We are busy, we are tired, we are overwhelmed. We cross the street to avoid the man with the cardboard sign. We look past the young immigrant mother and child selling candy or flowers. Or we say we don't have cash, or we'll come back. We avert our eyes.

Welcoming the stranger is foundational to Jewish law, identity, culture, and tradition. Rooted in Torah, the mitzvah, found in Exodus, "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt,"¹ is repeated and expanded not only in the Torah, but in our commentaries and rabbinic teachings throughout the millennia.

This verse in Exodus is not unique. The Torah repeats this command, in various formulations, more than any other mitzvah. The commandment not to oppress the stranger appears 36 times in the Torah. This number alone indicates its profound significance.

In another section of Exodus, we read, "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."²

And Leviticus expands: "When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt".³

The Hebrew term used for stranger is *ger* (גֵּר). In the biblical context, the *ger* is typically a non-Israelite residing among the Israelites, and is someone without land, tribe, or protection — a vulnerable person.

Importantly, the Torah makes no distinction between citizen and foreigner when it comes to ethical treatment.

We read, "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt."

This verse stands out because it links law, legal imperative, with an emotional quality. It does not merely say not to oppress the stranger; it gives us a reason to follow this law, other than that it is a commandment. It says—don't do it because you know what it feels like to be oppressed. From the expulsion to the emancipation, in most countries throughout Europe and the Near East, we lived as resident aliens without legal protection or status and were second-class non-citizens.

Judaism is calling on our collective memory, our own pain, to remind us why we should follow the commandment not to oppress the stranger. We know oppression.

On several occasions, the Torah specifies: "You shall have the same law for the stranger as for the native-born."⁴ Not only must the stranger not be wronged, but they must be included in the Israelite society. Yet, it is more than this; the stranger must be loved: The Torah does not just warn against harming the stranger. It goes further: it commands us to love the stranger.

In Deuteronomy we read, "You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."⁵ Here, the Hebrew word for love (*ahavah*) does not describe a feeling, but rather it is a verb. The stranger is not to be merely tolerated but is to be actively embraced and supported.

The medieval philosopher Maimonides (Rambam) comments that loving the stranger is part of imitating God. God loves the stranger,⁶ "providing him with food and clothing"⁷ and so must we. Maimonides elevates this obligation to a divine imitation — to love the stranger is to act in the way of God.

This ethical demand extends to the judicial system as well:

In Leviticus,⁸ we read, "When a stranger lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The stranger living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt." And a few chapters later, we read "You shall have the same law for the stranger and the native-born, for I am the Lord your God."⁹

This principle of equal justice is revolutionary for its time. It's not enough to be kind to the stranger; Jewish law demands that the stranger be treated with legal equity.

The Jewish historical experience — as immigrants, exiles, and refugees — has made this teaching painfully relevant. From the Babylonian exile to the Spanish expulsion to the

Holocaust and the modern refugee crisis in Ethiopia, Russia, and beyond, Jewish communities have often stood in the place of the stranger.

Jewish tradition turned this painful history into an ethical obligation. For each year at the seder, we say out loud: "In every generation, a person is obligated to see themselves as if they personally came out of Egypt."

This reenactment is not just historical — it's moral. By remembering our own suffering, we can cultivate compassion toward others and act in their best interests as well.

Welcoming the stranger is one of the most consistent and insistent messages of the Torah. It is a command not just of law, but of the heart; not just for ancient Israel, but for us today.

The Torah does not ask us to pity the stranger, or merely to tolerate them. It demands that we identify with them, love them, and ensure justice for them because we know. Because we remember. The imperative to welcome the stranger is, of course, particularly urgent at this moment.

What is happening to the stranger among us today is antithetical to who we are as a people. To our faith, to Torah to our sense of communal moral obligation. It is surreal to stand here, to be in prayer while our Chicago streets are patrolled with armed, masked government agents hunting down immigrants, as though they are capturing enemy combatants. It is appalling to note that many who have been captured and detained, and even deported, have legal US status. It is also repugnant that the vast majority of those

forcefully apprehended are not violent criminals or threats to public safety; they are merely housekeepers, day laborers, and busboys simply trying to feed their families by doing jobs that no one else will do. It's terribly upsetting.

May we not look away with callous indifference, may we take the time to truly remember that it is the luck of the draw that we are in this room, or on zoom, attending this service, and weren't born into poorer countries without hope or opportunities. We are quite fortunate.

May we recognize and act on our moral obligation to love the stranger, to protect them, and to treat them with compassion and dignity.

Ken yehi ratzon—May this be God's will. And may it be ours, too.

¹ 23:9

² 22:20

³ 19:33-34

⁴ 24:22, Exodus 12:49, and Numbers 15:16

⁵ 10:19

⁶ Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De'ot 6:4

⁷ Deuteronomy 10:18,

⁸ 19:33-34

⁹ 24:22