

I am a Stranger and a Dweller Amongst You:

Expanding the Rav's Confrontation

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Some fifty three years ago, in the midst of the Second Vatican Council, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik penned one of the most significant essays of the twentieth century. As the Church revisited foundational doctrines regarding attitudes towards the Jewish people, considerable pressure mounted for renewed interfaith dialogue, for discussions of theology between Jews and Catholics.

True to form, Rabbi Soloveitchik, known simply as the Rav, looked to the text of the Chumash for guidance in formulating his response: in particular, he looked to this very parshah. The Rav noted that while the indigenous people are only too ready to grant Avraham, whom they consider to be a prince, **נשיא אלוקים**, **אתה בתוכנו** a burial plot from their very finest, **במבחר קברינו קבור את מתך**, Avraham maintains his distance, insisting on purchasing not only the cave itself, but the entire field which would surround it.

Separate burial grounds, from Avraham's point of view, was much more than a limited acquisition, but reflective of a critical philosophical point, a deep truth concerning the confrontation between the Jew and the broad expanse of humanity. Looking to Avraham's introductory words, **גר ותושב אנכי עמכם**, the Rav perceived a classical dialectic: yes, the Jew is a *toshav*, a natural dweller amidst all of humanity, committing to stand shoulder to shoulder to advance civilization, improve technology and medicine, and raise the quality of human life and personal dignity.

At the same time, however, the Jew is a stranger, a **גר**, who, in matters of ritual law, whether it is burial grounds or matters of doctrinal significance, insists on standing apart. Thus, from the Rav's point of view, there could be no interfaith dialogue on matters of religion, dogma, and doctrine. Each faith tradition stands apart and alone, incomprehensible, even with respect to matters of language and nomenclature, let alone substance, to the other.

A quarter of a century following the Rav's passing, it seems to me that we might extend his sublime analysis of Avraham's stance *vis a vis* broader society, and note that there is only one other occasion in the entire Torah in which we are described as **גרים ותושבים**.

The context is the requirement of relinquishing acquired lands during the Yovel year, something profoundly difficult for a farmer who may have tilled that acquired land for his entire life. The Torah teaches, **כי לי הארץ כי גרים ותושבים אתם עמדי**. No human being can claim true title over the land, for the land, in the end, belongs to the Almighty, **כי לי הארץ**. Yet, the Torah goes much further, not satisfying itself by simply noting that God is the true owner of the land, and we must learn to relinquish control, at least twice a century. Rather, the Torah insists, **כי גרים ותושבים אתם עמדי**.

Drawing on the Rav's analysis, it would seem that precisely the dialectic which maintains in the interpersonal sphere, in which we insist on being both an organic part of all of humanity, but also separate and distinct, **גר ותושב**, the same must maintain in the context of our relationship with God.

On the one hand, we are, along with all of humanity, partners with our Creator in cultivating and developing the world, **לא תהו בראה לשבת יצרה**. It is this aspect which is emphasized during the six years we work the land during every agricultural cycle, and the six days of creative labor in which we engage every single week. Moreover, the Talmud twice states that in each family unit, the maternal and paternal figure partner with a Divine in a partnership of three to bring forth a child into this world.

Moving to the more particular Jewish sphere, we are uniquely a **ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש**, we have an intimate bond with our Father-Creator, as the mishnah in Avot proudly states, **חביבין ישראל שנקראו בנים למקום**. There is, without question, in our relationship with the Almighty, an aspect of *toshav*, of familiarity, of partnership, of shared purpose and mission.

And yet, we are also removed at a certain distance from the Creator. It is this aspect of *ger*, of estrangement, of distance, that we observe every seventh year during the agricultural cycle, and every seventh day during the week, when our creative labor must come to a halt. It is for this reason that the Torah introduces this dialectic of **גר ותושב** in the context of relinquishing our control of the land during the Yovel year.

Indeed, even the greatest of prophets could not possibly fathom the essence of God, **לא יראני האדם וחי**. All the more so, we can not understand the deep mysteries of Divine Providence in this world, nor do we countenance presumptuous attempts to explain that which He has obscured from us, **כי לא מחשבותי, מחשבותיכם**.

At once, we are His partners, and yet, we stand apart. We are His intimates, and yet, He remains cloaked in a shroud of mystery, **כי בענן אראה על הכפרת**. We proudly engage in acts of creative labor, and then, humbly withdraw to bear witness to His mastery and sovereignty. We surge forth with deep love to draw near Him, and then immediately recoil in awe and reverence, overwhelmed by His perfection, and our relative insignificance¹.

In a sentence, **כי גרים ותושבים אתם עמדי**.

¹ See Rambam Hilchot Yesodei Ha-Torah 2:1 in his classical formulation of the dynamic interplay between Ahavat Hashem and Yirat Hashem. It seems to me not insignificant that Avraham is the paragon of both modalities of the Divine-human encounter (**אברהם אהבי, עתה ידעתי כי ירא אלוקים אתה**) and equally, the one who first articulated the *ger-toshav* dialectic.