

Torah On One Foot
Rabbi Matthew Berger



Caring for the Stranger

On two separate occasions in this week's Torah portion, *Mishpatim* (Laws), there is a commandment to care for the *ger* or "stranger." The Jewish community is especially sensitive about caring for newcomers because of our history as outsiders. Indeed, there are no less than thirty-six (double chai) places in the Torah that call for justice for the stranger. No other *mitzvah* or sacred obligation is mentioned as many times as this.

Rabbi Harvey Fields has noted that even the language of the commandments dealing with the stranger are special. Most of the *mitzvot* are categorized as either positive or negative. For example, a positive *mitzvah* is "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" and a negative *mitzvah* is "do not steal." The laws regarding the stranger, however, are *both* positive and negative. In the Torah we find, "you shall love the stranger" and "do not oppress the stranger."

All of us can relate to being a stranger or newcomer. Going somewhere new for the first time or trying to join an established group can be very challenging. Even the smallest negative interaction can greatly impact our willingness to engage or return again. On the other hand, when we reach out to others in a kind and caring way, a holy spark is created. As a rabbi, I see this on a regular basis during *Oneg Shabbat* (post-service gatherings). All of us, within the synagogue walls and when we are on our way, have a special and, yes, sacred obligation to make strangers feel "at home."