I am a border woman. I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling that tejas-Mexican border, and others, all my life. It's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger, and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape.

However, there have been compensations for this mestiza, and certain joys. Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an "alien" element. There is an exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind, in being "worked" on. I have the sense that certain "faculties"—not just in me but in every border resident, colored or non-colored—and dormant areas of consciousness are being activated, awakened. Strange, huh? And yes, the "alien" element has become familiar—never comfortable, not with society's clamor to uphold the old, to rejoin the flock, to go with the herd. No, not comfortable but home.

- Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*

Scholar Gloria Anzaldúa grew up in the Rio Grande Valley on the border of Mexico and southern Texas. In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa analyzes the cultural and physical landscape of the southern border, describing what it means to be a resident of the border; to see and to feel the fusion and tension of the in-between play out on one's person. As a border woman, Anzaldúa's body is the site on which multiple frontiers meet. In the mix and mingle of the border's many fusions and ambiguities, Anzaldúa stakes out a space of agency and transformation, a homeland for those who live in the ever-changing landscape of the borderlands.

This week's parashah, *Mishpatim*, takes place against the backdrop of a borderland: the setting forth laws given at Mt. Sinai as the Israelites journey through the wilderness from slavery in Egypt to an unknown future in their own land. Within this evolving landscape, we meet the ger: the biblical stranger, the resident alien living within the tribes of Israel. We read, "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:20). Resident aliens could not own landed property; most were poor day laborers or artisans, and in Israelite society they were included with the poor, widows and orphans as recipients of welfare. As Jeffrey Tigay explains, the ger, like the orphan and the widow, lacked social and familial networks of protection and support and was therefore more vulnerable to exploitation (The Jewish Study Bible). But as non-Israelites, gerim were especially vulnerable. As Jacob Milgrom writes, "Although all three are subject to exploitation, the orphans and widows are Israelites and ties of blood entitle them to turn to authorities—be they judicial or social—for help. The ger, however, cannot call on any ethnic bond" (Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22: A New Translation*).

Remarkably, the proper treatment of gerim is a leitmotif in biblical literature. According to the Talmudic sage Rabbi Eliezer, the Torah "warns against the wronging of a ger in 36 places; others say, in 46 places" (Baba Metzia 59). But the law goes beyond these prohibitions of doing harm. "Love the stranger who resides in your midst," Leviticus teaches, "for you were strangers in
Egypt" (Lev. 19:34). And in this week’s parashah we find this: "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the Land of Egypt" (Ex.23:9). Thus, Israelites must offer gerim not only material resources, but empathic understanding.

Nevertheless, the ger is not an Israelite; though gerim participate in Israelite life, they are not full members of the community. The boundary drawn between the Israelite and the resident alien moving through the community is a way of defining Israelite identity against the other. Living among the Israelites but not of them, the in-between identity of the biblical stranger is the site on which multiple frontiers meet: the history and story of the Israelite people coming up against the histories and stories of their ancient neighbors.

As Gloria Anzaldúa reminds us, the borderlands are a place of both pain and joy, a literal and poetic landscape in which imagination and possibility take root. Immersing ourselves this week in the borderlands of the Exodus wilderness, imbued with its infinite possibilities, allows us to reimagine the story of the biblical stranger within our tradition, pointing us toward a more just ethic of immigration and border passage grounded in Jewish texts and enriched by modern-day scholarship. What would it look like to build a Jewish ethic of immigration and border crossing that is informed both by Jewish history and by the stories and histories of modern day border crossings?

An ethic that emerges from the experiences of a person living in multiple frontiers offers a call that goes beyond a moral concern for the vulnerable. Constructing an ethic of immigration for her Catholic context, ethicist Tisha M. Rajendra writes:

**Benevolence and hospitality are cornerstones of both Christian ethics and common-sense morality. However, they are not adequate solutions to the problem of migration. In the same way that benevolence is often presented as the solution for poverty, missing the role of justice in righting the wrongs that have led to extreme inequality, Catholic social thought on migration misses the participation of the receiving country in the processes that lead to migration. (Tisha M. Rajendra, "Justice Not Benevolence; Catholic Social Thought, Migration Theory, and the Rights of Migrants")**

Rajendra's insistence on justice over benevolence points us to a new and deeper ethic of relating to the stranger: one that does not merely address the material needs of immigrants, but views those who cross national borders as agents of historical change. As individuals existing within many webs of connection, embodying identities that are fluid, multidimensional, multicultural and multilingual, border-crossers challenge our own fixed notions of identity. And their presence in American society points to larger injustices and conflicts that demand our attention.

Thus, the stranger within our sacred texts prompts us to ask larger theological and ethical questions about patterns of immigration today: How did this person come to sojourn among us? What is their story? How can we understand their presence here as a testament to their ability to survive and nourish networks of support? How is it an indictment of larger historical, economic, social and environmental forces? What role did we play, wittingly or not, in their border passage? And most important: how are we called to enact justice?

These questions, born of the wilderness experience and informed by contemporary theologies of immigration, provide a Jewish lens through which to not only care for and welcome those seeking refuge within our borders, but also to interrogate current policies and advocate for a
humanizing and accountable immigration system. Because we have historically been wanderers, the experience of estrangement, the sense that we are outsiders, is etched into the soul of the Jewish people. It is both our inheritance and our call to just action.