PARASHAT MISHPATIM
Exodus 21:1–24:18

Parashat Mishpatim presents the ***mishpatim,*** "rules" or "laws," that govern the ancient Jewish community. The code of law deals with the treatment of slaves; crimes of murder and kidnapping; personal injuries; damages through neglect or theft; offenses against others through lying, witchcraft, idolatry, oppression, unfair business practices; and unjust treatment by judges. This Torah portion also includes a warning against following others to do evil, along with directives to care for the distressed animals of your enemy and to show impartiality in making judgments. Israelites are reminded to demonstrate sensitivity to the stranger because they were strangers in the land of Egypt. Finally, the portion presents rules for the Sabbath, sabbatical year, Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukot. Upon hearing all these laws, Moses gathers the people at Mount Sinai to offer sacrifices and declares, "All the things that God has commanded we will do!"

OUR TARGUM

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While still at Mount Sinai, Moses presents the people with the laws that will govern their community.

About slavery, which was common among all peoples at that time, Moses declares that a slave will be free after seven years and clarifies the rights of slaves and their children in cases of marriage.

Those who deliberately murder are to be put to death. Those who accidentally kill another person are provided a safe place where they can seek judgment. Kidnappers or those who curse their parents are to be put to death.

If a person injures another in a quarrel, payment is to be made for both the cure and loss of work time. If the injured party is a pregnant woman who happens to miscarry, then the one responsible will pay damages agreed to by her husband. If, however, the injury is to the body, the penalty will be "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise."

If an ox gores a man or woman, the ox will be stoned or put to death; but, if the ox is known

to be dangerous and its owner has not taken steps to guard it, both the ox and the owner shall be put to death. When a person's ox kills another ox, the owners are to sell the live ox and split the money received for both the live and dead animals. However, if it was known as a dangerous ox and the owner did not guard it, he must restore it with a live ox and keep the dead animal.

If a person digs a pit and neglects to cover it, he is responsible to pay for whatever falls into it and is harmed.

Fines shall be paid for stealing, for allowing one's animals to graze on another's property, for damages related to starting a fire, for misappropriation of property, for animals that are borrowed and die of injuries, and for seducing a virgin.

Witchcraft is forbidden; also forbidden is having sex with an animal or offering sacrifices to other gods.

Jews are forbidden to wrong or oppress the stranger. They are to remember that they were strangers in Egypt.

Widows and orphans must be treated with care. The poor are to be given interest-free loans. If a person gives a garment as guarantee for a loan, that garment must be returned by sunset so the person will be safe from the chill of night.

Spreading rumors, cursing leaders, joining with others to give false testimony, siding with others to do wrong, showing favoritism to rich or poor in courts of law, making false charges, or taking bribes are all forbidden.

Returning an enemy's lost animal or caring for it if it is in distress is considered the right thing to do.

·2·

Serving God includes not only the ethical conduct commanded above but also the celebration of special rituals. The firstborn of the flocks are to be

sacrificed to God as thanksgiving offerings. Eating the flesh of beasts killed by other animals is forbidden. The Sabbath is to be observed each week, and a sabbatical year in which the fields are allowed to rest from planting is to be practiced every seventh year. A kid is not to be boiled in its mother's milk.

Three times a year, on Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukot, the people are to celebrate before God.

·3·

God promises the Israelites that, if they will be faithful to these laws and not follow the idolatrous practices of other peoples, God's angel will lead them victoriously into their land.

Moses is instructed to climb Mount Sinai along with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. On Sinai, Moses repeats all the laws, and the people answer, "All the things that God has commanded we will do!" Moses offers a sacrifice to mark their commitment to God's laws. Afterwards, he ascends Mount Sinai to receive the stone tablets of the law. He disappears from sight inside a cloud at the top of the mountain, where he remains for forty days and nights.

THEMES

Parashat Mishpatim contains two important themes:

1. The importance of the *mitzvot,* or "commandments."
2. Care for the *ger,* or "stranger."

PEREK ALEF: *Ethical and Ritual Mitzvot*

Parashat Mishpatim begins with the words of God to Moses, "These are the rules that you shall set before them." It then continues with a detailed list of the mitzvot or commandments that the people are to follow. It is a long list containing a wide variety of rules. There are commandments having to do with the treatment of slaves; the consequences of murder, kidnapping, or cursing one's parents; the responsibilities of one person to another in cases of damage or neglect; concern for the stranger and the poor; warnings to judges and witnesses about honesty and fairness in court. There are also mitzvot dealing with the observance of the Sabbath, the sabbatical year, the festivals of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukot, along with those prohibiting the boiling of a kid in its mother's milk, of worshiping idols, or even mentioning the names of other gods.

While this Torah portion is called *mishpatim,* or "laws," it is not the only portion containing such a list of commandments. Throughout the five books of the Torah we find hundreds of commandments or mitzvot that begin with the words "You shall . . ." or "You shall not. . . ." Many of these are repetitious. The Ten Commandments, for example, mentioned in Exodus 20:2–14 are repeated in Deuteronomy 5:6–18, and many of the rules recorded in *Mishpatim* are also found scattered throughout Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

Perhaps the first commentator to ask the question "How many mitzvot did God give to the Jewish people at Sinai?" was Rabbi Simlai. Simlai, who taught in both the Land of Israel and Babylonia during the fourth century C.E., declared that Moses received 613 commandments at Sinai. Simlai divided these into two categories: 248 were *mitzvat aseh,* "positive commandments," which begin with the words "You shall . . ." and correspond to the 248 parts of the human body; 365 were *mitzvat lo ta'aseh,* or "negative commandments," which begin with the words "You shall not . . ." and correspond to the number of days in the solar year. The commandments, Simlai emphasized, were meant to guide human beings in the use of all their physical powers during each day of the year. (*Makot* 23b)

Other commentators divide the mitzvot of the Torah into two different categories. Those com-

mandments dealing with the observance of the Sabbath, holidays, diet, and other religious practices are called *mitzvot bein adam le-Makom,* "commandments between the human being and God." Those commandments dealing with the ethical and moral relationships between human beings are labeled *mitzvot bein adam le-chavero,* "commandments between the individual and other human beings. (*Yoma* 85b)

This division of the mitzvot into ritual and ethical categories, however, does not mean that the interpreters of Jewish tradition considered one set of commandments more important than the other. Both were of equal significance, and often commentators point out that the ritual mitzvot lead a person to ethical action. For instance, a part of fulfilling the mitzvah of making a Pesach seder is to invite "all who are hungry to eat."

Despite the fact that early commentators had created two categories of mitzvot and that Rabbi Simlai uses the figure of 613 mitzvot, it is not until the eighth century that the Babylonian teacher Simeon Kairo actually tried to identify which of the hundreds of commandments mentioned in the Torah were to be counted among them. Kairo offers an explanation for each mitzvah, but he also differs with Rabbi Simlai in his count of the positive and negative commandments. Kairo lists 265 positive mitzvot and 348 negative mitzvot. Following Kairo, many other scholars offer their own explanations and lists of what has become known as the *Taryag Mitzvot* (made up of the letters *tav,* representing the numerical value of 400, *resh,* representing the value of 200, *yod,* representing the Ten Commandments, and *gimel,* representing the value of 3).

While most commentators agree with Rabbi Simlai and Kairo that *Taryag Mitzvot,* 613 commandments, were given by God to Moses, there is no agreement about which of the commandments were to be included on the list. Great scholars like Sa'adia Gaon, poets like Solomon ibn Gabirol and Elijah the Elder, as well as philosophers like Hafetz ben Yatzliah—all differ with one another. Each offers a different point of view, underscoring the fact that Jewish tradition was never static and unchanging but always made room for the evolution of new insights and interpretations of how Jews should practice their faith.

Rambam (Maimonides)

It was the great teacher Moses Maimonides, however, who formulated the most authoritative list of the *Taryag Mitzvot.* Writing in Egypt, in 1168 C.E., at the age of thirty-five, Maimonides created his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot.* Using as his basis both Rabbi Simlai's division of the 613 commandments and the two categories of *mitzvot bein adam le-Makom* and *mitzvot bein adam le-chavero,* Maimonides offers an explanation for each mitzvah and arguments for living one's life according to the discipline of each one. He argues that the commandments are "meant to suppress the human being's natural tendency . . . to correct our moral qualities and to keep straight all our doings." (*Mishneh Torah,* bk. 9, chap. 4)

But Maimonides also realizes that there are many commandments that do not seem to improve human behavior. Such commandments as not eating pork or crab meat or those having to do with sacrifices during Temple times do not seem to have any meaning at all. How shall we explain them? How can we even justify continuing their observance? In response, Maimonides writes: "It is fitting for a person to meditate upon the laws of the holy Torah and to comprehend their full meaning to the extent of his ability. However, a law for which a person finds no reason and understands no cause should not be considered trivial. . . . One should be on guard not to rebel against a commandment decreed for us by God only because the reason for it is not understood. . . ." (Ibid., chap. 8)

Like Maimonides, many other commentators have tried to understand the reasons for the mitzvot of Jewish tradition. While some agree with Maimonides that it is difficult and often impossible to find meanings for all the commandments, most believe that the mitzvot have special purpose and significance.

Reasons for doing mitzvot

Ibn Ezra

The essential reason for the commandments is to make the human heart upright. (*Abraham ibn Ezra, Commentary on Deuteronomy 5:18*)

Each commandment adds holiness to the people of Israel. (*Issi ben Akabia,* Mechilta, *Exodus 22:30*)

The purpose of the mitzvot is . . . to promote compassion, loving-kindness, and peace in the world.
(*Maimonides,* Yad, Shabbat, *1180, 2, 3*)

The talmudic teacher Rab holds that the commandments were given by God to the Jewish people in order to discipline them. Through their observance they will be refined and strengthened in character and behavior. Another ancient interpreter claimed that it made no difference to God how animals were slaughtered. All the mitzvot having to do with ritual slaughter, and others as well, were meant "to purify the people of Israel." In other words, the commandments were considered exercises, a means of training people to be more sensitive to one another and to the world in which they live.

Another teacher suggests that the commandments are meant to make us more righteous. Each of us has the potential of adding kindness and justice to the world, or of adding to the pain and suffering of others. We should see ourselves as half-good and half-evil. By observing mitzvot we become more just and loving and add to the good in our lives and in the world. (*Genesis Rabbah* 44:1; *Tanchuma, Shemini,* 5; *Pesachim* 50b)

For Rabbi Abahu the commandments were not necessarily just a way of improving human behavior but also a means of preserving the survival of the world! He argues that God created the world as a gardener creates a beautiful orchard. The commandments given to Israel are like instructions given to those chosen to tend the garden. If they are followed, the orchard would survive, flower, and feed all who require its food. (*Exodus Rabbah* 30:9)

Other interpreters believe that the purpose of the mitzvot is only partially connected to improving human behavior or to promoting the survival of the world. The commandments, they maintain, are meant to guarantee entrance into the *olam ha-ba,* "the world to come," or "heaven." "All the mitzvot that the people of Israel do in this world will come and testify in their favor in heaven," says one teacher. Another poetically declares that "each commandment a person does in this world forms a thread of light in heaven, and all of the threads are spun together to form a garment for that person to wear when he dies and goes to heaven." For these commentators, the mitzvot are the means through which one insures a place and "a garment" in the world to come. (*Avodah Zarah* 2a; *Zohar* III:113a)

Sarna

In his study of Exodus, contemporary interpreter Nahum Sarna makes an observation about the unique nature of the ethical and ritual laws found within the Torah and, especially, within *Parashat Mishpatim.* While the laws of other ancient people are divided between secular and religious matters, the Torah presents an "indiscriminate commingling and interweaving . . . of cultic topics and moral imperatives" for which there is "absolutely no analogy." Within the Torah there is no attempt to separate ethical and ritual concerns. They are combined. Ritual commandments and celebrations often lead to ethical action. "The Torah," Sarna writes, "treats life holistically"; everything a person does, secular or religious, is seen as a potential mitzvah meant to serve God and uplift life with meaning. (*Exploring Exodus,* p. 174)

Sarna's view is shared by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. For Heschel, Judaism is "a science

of deeds" or mitzvot that are meant to add the "taste or flavor" of holiness to human life. Being a Jew, Heschel explains, is not just a matter of performing rituals and moral deeds. It is realizing that in the doing of the mitzvah one is seeking to do what God wants of us. It is lighting a lamp before God. It is changing or transforming ourselves by that light so that we "absorb the holiness of deeds." The purpose of the mitzvot, Heschel says, "is to refine man. They were given for the benefit of man: to protect and to ennoble him, to discipline and to inspire him." (*God in Search of Man,* chap. 34)

While for Heschel the doing of mitzvot is meant to elevate us to new levels of holiness, to deepen our sensitivities and our awareness of what God requires of us, for Rabbi Herman E. Schaalman, we are to do the mitzvot "because we are the descendants of those ancestors, the children of those parents who said at Sinai: *Na'aseh ve-nishma,* 'We shall do and we shall hear.' " The commandments, in other words, are our historical inheritance. They are the way in which God continues to speak to us.

Rabbi David Polish agrees. "Mitzvot," he says, "are 'signs' of the covenant, affirmed and reaffirmed through the ages at various turning points in which Jewish existence stood in the balance. . . . Thus the mitzvot around birth, *milah* (circumcision), naming, education, marriage, and death take on added meaning because in each case the individual is made conscious of his own role in Jewish history." For these thinkers, the doing of each commandment is a way of identifying as a Jew. It is a means of linking oneself to the historical covenant of the people of Israel with God. (Simeon J. Maslin, editor, *Gates of Mitzvah,* Central Conference of American Rabbis, New York, 1979, pp. 100–107)

The 613 commandments form the essential core of Jewish practice and tradition. Their blend of both the ethical and ritual is unique. Perhaps that explains why Jews in every age sought to understand the purpose and meaning of the mitzvot and felt compelled to shape their lives and the quality of their community by practicing them.

In ancient times Rabbi Ishmael taught that the commandments were given to the people of Israel so they might "*live* by them." In other words, the mitzvot are for enhancing life, for celebrating it with special meanings, for filling it with deeds of justice, kindness, and peace. Today the challenge of living a mitzvah-filled life continues as the central goal of Jewish tradition.

PEREK BET: *Caring for the Stranger*

Twice in the midst of *Parashat Mishpatim* we find a commandment dealing with care for the *ger,* or "stranger." (Exodus 22:20; 23:9) This emphasis upon the treatment of aliens or foreigners—those who are new to a community or society—is not unusual within the Torah. Early Jewish tradition emphasizes the pain of the outsider and seeks solutions to it. Commandments calling for sensitivity and justice for the *ger* are found in thirty-six different places within the Torah, more than the mention of any other mitzvah.

Even the language of the commandments dealing with the *ger* is special. At times we are given a positive formulation such as "you shall love the stranger . . ."; in other places, a negative formulation such as "you shall not oppress the stranger. . . ." Treatment of the stranger is one of those rare rules that is listed not only among the 248 *mitzvat aseh* but also among the 365 *mitzvat lo ta'aseh.* Frequently, the mitzvah also includes the reminder that "you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Many commentators note this unique emphasis of the Torah upon justice for the stranger and ask: "Why all these warnings? Why all this attention to the *ger?*"

Early rabbinic interpreters offer a variety of opinions. Many understand that the word *ger* does not mean only "stranger." They point out that it also translates as "convert." For instance, we are told that "God so loves *gerim,* or 'converts,' that God postponed Abraham's circumcision until he was ninety so future converts would know one can become a Jew at any age." Another sage suggests that Jews are commanded to love converts because the Torah uses similar descriptions for both Jews and *gerim.* Both are called "servants," "ministers at the altar," "friends of God." Even the notion of a covenant with God is mentioned in connection with both.

Concern for the convert
Should a convert come to study Torah, one may not say to him or her, "How can one who has eaten forbidden foods have the presumption to study God's Torah?" (Baba Metzia *58b*)

Those who bring others near to Judaism by warmly welcoming them as converts are considered by God as if they have given birth to them. (Bereshit Rabbah)

The treatment of converts is a sensitive matter. Entering a new group, whether religious or secular, is always frightening. One is not sure of what to expect and, therefore, is uncertain and uncomfortable. The welcome given by a family or group to a newcomer can make the difference between feeling accepted or rejected. Perhaps that is why Jewish tradition emphasizes reaching out with friendship to the *ger* to make certain that he or she is "at home" within the Jewish community.

For many early rabbinic interpreters, all this concern for the feelings of the *ger* meant that Jews had a special obligation to treat converts fairly, never to take advantage of them, insult them about their past, or find fault with them. "Converts," the rabbis declare, "are beloved by God." (*Mechilta, Nezikin,* 18, on Exodus 22:20)

Later commentators not only note that Jews must welcome and appreciate converts but also treat any *ger* justly. They point out that the Torah cautions us not to oppress the *ger* because "you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt." This warning, say these teachers, raises significant questions: Do memories of the past, especially a painful past, teach us to be more sensitive to the feelings of others? Can those who recall being abused or oppressed prevent themselves from abusing or oppressing others?

Rashi

In answer to these questions, there is a serious division of opinion among interpreters. For example, Rashi's view is that for many people memories of cruel treatment do not teach sensitivity and that what the Torah really meant by its warning was that, if you oppressed the *ger,* he or she might answer by reminding you of your own lowly origins. You might be told, "Don't try to elevate yourself by demeaning me. After all, you also come from strangers. Your people were *gerim* in Egypt!"

On the other hand, Rashi does allow for those who might be more enlightened and made aware of the suffering of the stranger through their study of Jewish history and their understanding of how their people were persecuted in Egypt. Commenting on the Torah's observation, "you know the feelings of the stranger," Rashi suggests that because you have been in pain "you know how painful it is for him when you oppress him." (Comment on Exodus 22:20; 23:9)

Sixteenth-century commentator Moshe ben Alshekh, who spent most of his life in Safed, amplifies Rashi's view with his own. He maintains that the Torah's linkage of the warning about "knowing the feelings of the stranger" with the reminder that "you were strangers in Egypt" is deliberate. The Torah, Alshekh claims, teaches us not to oppress the stranger by noting our own treatment by God. "When you lived in Egypt," Alshekh explains, "you worshiped idols. Afterwards you accepted the Torah. Just as God did not look down on you for having worshiped idols and [thus] decide not to give you the Torah, so you must not look down upon the stranger." Clearly, it is Alshekh's conviction that Jews who recall their origins before being given the Torah will be more sensitive to the feelings of strangers and will treat them with more understanding and fairness. (Comment on Exodus 22:20)

Ramban (Nachmanides)

Nachmanides presents a differing point of view. For him the linkage between the commandment not to oppress the stranger and the observation "for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt" is not simply a reminder about "common origins."

It is a warning about how God works in history on behalf of the oppressed.

Nachmanides argues that God speaks through the words of Torah, saying to the people: "You should not think that the stranger has no one to save him from the violence or oppression of your hands. On the contrary, you should know that, when you were strangers in Egypt, I saw the oppression with which the Egyptians were persecuting you and I brought punishment upon them. For I see the sufferings that are inflicted by evildoers on people and the tears of the oppressed who have none to comfort them. And I free every person from hands of violence. Therefore, do not afflict the stranger, thinking there is no one to save him. For he will be helped more than any other person!" (Comment on Exodus 22:20 and 23:9)

Nachmanides' view is that the Torah's reminder to the Jewish people that "you were strangers in the land of Egypt" is not just for the purpose of recollecting their painful status as persecuted people. It is also a lesson about whose side God takes in situations of oppression. God, Nachmanides teaches, stands by the persecuted. God comforts and heals the wounds of the abused, and God refuses to rest until, like the enslaved Israelites, they are free. The recollection of what God did for the Israelites in Egypt is meant to encourage Jews, who are God's partners, to help the oppressed.

Leibowitz

Differing with Nachmanides, modern commentator Nehama Leibowitz looks carefully at the Torah text and questions whether the memory of persecution really prevents one from becoming a persecutor. For the enlightened, she argues, such a recollection of history may be sufficient. It may lead to sensitivity and to a genuine concern for the strangers. For others, however, this is not the case. "The hate, persecution, and shame the individual or community experiences in the past do not act as a deterrent, preventing them from adopting the same attitude to those entrusted to their power, later on."

On abuse and oppression

Enlarging upon her observation, Leibowitz writes, "The fact that 'you were strangers in the land of Egypt' is certainly no adequate motivation for not oppressing or troubling the stranger. On the contrary, how often do we find that the slave or exile who gains power and freedom, or anyone who harbors the memory of suffering to himself or his family, finds compensation for his former sufferings by giving free rein to his tyrannical instincts when he has the opportunity to seize power over others?" (Studies in Shemot, *p. 384*)

Contemporary studies of abuse in marriage, or by parents or teachers, demonstrate the correctness of Leibowitz's observation. Tragically, patterns of battering and harassment often repeat from generation to generation. Those who are victimized and oppressed often turn their frustration and anger upon others and become brutal oppressors themselves.

What is true about physical abuse is also the case with "substance" abuse. Alcoholics, smokers, and drug addicts have often inherited their "habit" from parents or other adults in their environment. Having suffered from the results of neglect and even violence by substance abusers or having seen the illness and destructive results of narcotics, drinking, and smoking does not necessarily lead to a rejection of them. More often than not the cycle of violence to oneself and others continues. Victims take up the "habit," and the tragedy becomes a bitter cycle.

The answer to these cycles of abuse, whether of "substances" or of strangers, requires two different kinds of education, according to Leibowitz. The first is to appeal to the intellect and to teach people sensitivity by allowing them to learn the harmful effects of violence through a study of history. However, many people, Leibowitz maintains, are incapable of learning such a lesson. They require a second form of education. Memories of their own suffering do not act as a deterrent to their oppression of others. The only way to break the cycle of violence, argues Leibowitz, is by shocking such people with the realization that they will pay a high price for taking advantage of the

stranger or for abusing substances. Only then will they change their patterns of behavior.

As we have seen, many interpreters understand that the Torah identifies the *ger,* or "stranger," as a *convert* to Judaism. Yet not all commentators adopt this rather narrow reading of the Torah text. For many Jewish teachers through the ages, the word *ger* meant any stranger, anyone new to the community, whether Jew or non-Jew.

Protecting the ger

Ger was the term applied to the resident non-Israelite who could no longer count on the protection of his erstwhile tribe or society. . . . The ger was to be given every consideration, and care must be taken that not only his rights but his feelings as well were safeguarded. He must never be shamed. . . . (Plaut, editor, The Torah: A Modern Commentary, *p. 582)*

It is forbidden to wrong or oppress the stranger . . . the reason given is purely ethical: you yourselves suffered as sojourners in a strange land, and you know the soul of the sojourner; therefore, take heed not to embitter the life of the sojourner living in your midst just as you did not wish the Egyptians to embitter your lives when you dwelt among them. (Umberto Cassuto, comment on Exodus 22:20 and 23:9)

Hirsch

Protecting the stranger, as Leibowitz notes, is a matter of high ethical priority within Jewish tradition. More is at stake, however, than the feelings or rights of the alien. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch makes this clear in his comment that "the treatment given to strangers is always the surest standard by which to measure the respect for human rights and the humanitarianism that prevails in any state." For that reason, Hirsch argues, the Torah places great emphasis upon assuring justice and charity for the alien and protection from oppression and harassment. "The granting of unrestricted rights of living, working, and earning a livelihood to aliens is demanded from the community or nation."

For Hirsch, however, the treatment of the stranger is also a special test of living ethically as a Jew. Because of their history of persecution, Jews should be more sensitive to the suffering of foreigners or strangers. "Though others may discriminate against the Jew," Hirsch says, "you must not fail to recognize every stranger as a human being! . . . show that you are a Jew—hold the stranger sacred." (Comment on Exodus 23:9; also in *Horeb: A Philosophy of Jewish Laws and Observances,* translated by I. Grunfeld, Soncino Press, New York, Fourth edition, 1981, pp. 254–256)

Rabbi Leo Baeck agrees with Hirsch. For him, as well, treatment of the stranger is a test of the creative power of Jewish teachings in the lives of Jews. Baeck points out that within the Torah the word *ger* takes on a special meaning because all human beings are called "strangers," "pilgrims," or "aliens." We are told that God says, ". . . the land is Mine; for you are strangers and settlers with Me." (Leviticus 25:23) That statement, Baeck argues, reminds us that no people is superior to any other, no person is more sacred than any other. We are all strangers and must care for one another. (*The Essence of Judaism,* Schocken Books, New York, 1948, pp. 197–198)

As we have noted, Jewish tradition emphasizes just treatment for the *ger,* or "stranger." For some commentators that meant special concern and sensitivity for converts to Judaism. Many others understood that the term *"ger"* meant any stranger. Jews were commanded by God to protect the rights and feelings of the alien, not only because such treatment was just, but also because they themselves had been persecuted strangers in Egypt and throughout their history. The Torah's attitude toward the *ger* is perhaps best summed up in the commandment "You shall love the stranger as yourself." (Leviticus 19:34)

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. How do the commentators see the relationship between ethical and ritual mitzvot? How

would you describe the purpose of mitzvot in Jewish life?

2. In the *Centenary Perspective* of Reform Judaism, adopted in 1976 by the Central Conference of American Rabbis, it is stated that "the past century has taught us that the claims made upon us may begin with our ethical obligations but they extend to many other aspects of Jewish living, including: creating a Jewish home centered on family devotion; lifelong study; private prayer and public worship; daily religious observance; keeping the Sabbath and the holy days; celebrating the major events of life; involvement with the synagogue and community; and other activities that promote the survival of the Jewish people and enhance its existence." Is it true that the doing of mitzvot guarantees the survival of Jews and Judaism?
3. What have "strangers" and "converts" in common, justifying that, in Hebrew, both are called *gerim?*
4. Do you agree or disagree that the repetition of the reminder that Jews were strangers in Egypt has tended to teach greater sensitivity for the plight of the stranger and the alienated? How do you create conditions of just treatment for strangers?