

Love the Stranger

Introduction

In this week’s Torah portion, *Mishpatim*, we are taught twice to be kind to “strangers” (*gerim*):

וְגֵר לֹא-תוֹנֶה וְלֹא תִלְחָצֶנּוּ כִּי-גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:
You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. [Exodus 22:20]

וְגֵר לֹא תִלְחָצֶנּוּ וְאַתֶּם יָדַעְתֶּם אֶת-נַפְשׁ הַגֵּר כִּי-גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:
And you shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the soul of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt. [Exodus 23:9]

Even earlier we were told that strangers have the same rights as we do:

תּוֹרַת אֶחָד יִהְיֶה לְאֻזְרַח וְלִגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם:
There shall be one law for the citizen and for the stranger who dwells among you. [Exodus 12:49]

This is repeated later in Leviticus:

מִשְׁפָּט אֶחָד יִהְיֶה לָכֶם כַּגֵּר כַּאֻזְרַח יִהְיֶה כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:
You shall have one standard for stranger and citizen alike, for I am the Lord your God. [Leviticus 24:22]

We are also told we must love the stranger:

וְכִי-יָגִיר אִתְּךָ גֵּר בְּאֶרְצְכֶם לֹא תוֹנֶה אֹתוֹ:
כַּאֻזְרַח מִכֶּם יִהְיֶה לָכֶם הַגֵּר | הַגֵּר אִתְּכֶם וְאַהֲבַת לֹו כְמוֹד כִּי-גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:
When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him.
The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens.
You shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.
I am the Lord your God. [Leviticus 19:33–34]

In Deuteronomy we are told:

-We must befriend the stranger:

וְאַהֲבַתְּם אֶת־הַגֵּר כִּי־גֵרִים הֵיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

[Deuteronomy 10:19]

-We must be fair to the stranger in court:

וְאֶצְוָה אֶת־שֹׁפְטֵיכֶם בְּעֵת הַהִוא לֵאמֹר שָׁמַע בֵּין־אֲחֵיכֶם וּשְׁפֹטֶתְם לְדָק בֵּין־אִישׁ וּבֵין־אֶחָיו וּבֵין־הָגֵר:

I charged your magistrates at that time as follows, "Hear out your fellow men, and decide justly between any man and a fellow Israelite or a stranger." [Deuteronomy

1:16]

-We must be fair to the stranger in employment matters:

לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂק שָׂכִיר עֲנִי וְאֶבְיֹן מֵאֲחֵיךָ אוֹ מִגֵּרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּאֶרֶצְךָ בְּשַׁעֲרֶיךָ:

לֹא תִטֶּה מִשְׁפַּט גֵּר

וְזָכַרְתָּ כִּי עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ בְּמִצְרַיִם

You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, whether a fellow countryman or a stranger in one of the communities of your land...

You shall not subvert the rights of the stranger... Remember that you were a slave in Egypt... [Deuteronomy 24:14–15, 17-18]

-If we don't do all that, we will incur a curse:

אָרוּר מִטֶּה מִשְׁפַּט גֵּר־יְתוֹם וְאֶלְמָנָה

Cursed be he who subverts the rights of the stranger, the orphan and the widow.

[Deuteronomy 27:19]

So: The stranger among you shall be subject to the same laws as you are; he has your same rights; don't abuse him or wrong him or oppress him; love him or you will be cursed. You know very well how he feels.

And that's in the Torah alone! The Talmud tells us that, in the entire Tanach, this injunction is repeated some 36 times, and some say 46 times!

[Bava Metzia 59b]

Main question

Why is this so important – presumably even more important than the many other commandments in *Mishpatim* (53 in all!), which are not repeated so regularly: Treating slaves and servants well; making proper restitution for damages caused; being honest in all financial dealings; judging fairly; not afflicting orphans and widows; taking care of wife's needs in food, clothing and sex; providing for the poor; deciding issues by majority vote; not eating milk and meat together; even helping your enemy in need – and many others.

Who is a “stranger”?

A *ger*, as used in the above Torah quotes and translated as “stranger”, is one who was not born Jewish, but is either

- A convert to Judaism (גר צֶדֶק -- *ger tzedek*, righteous stranger) or
- A permanent resident in a Jewish community who follows the seven Noahide laws (גר תושב -- *ger toshav*, resident stranger).

The word *ger* is derived from *gargir* (גרגר) an isolated berry at the far end of a solitary branch. [Rabbenu Bahya on Ex. 22:20]

The word has a positive connotation.

The Torah also uses two other words for “stranger”, *zar* and *nokhri*. Many Torah laws do not apply to them:

-A *zar* (זר) is someone who is “strange”, separate, unusual; not necessarily a foreigner. It is also used in the sense of someone outside the family or the narrow group [Ex. 21:8, Lev. 22:12, Deut. 25:5]; or an unauthorized or uninitiated person. [Ex. 29:33; Num. 1:51, 3:10, 3:38]

Idolatry is called *Avodah Zarah* – strange worship. Nadav and Avihu brought “strange fire” (אֵשׁ זָרָה -- *esh zarah*) before God and died. [Lev. 10:1] Nevertheless, the word generally has a neutral connotation.

-A *nokhri* (נֹכְרִי) is a Gentile – not Jewish and not necessarily resident. The word may have a negative connotation. It can be used for “enemy” [Deut. 32:27], “stranger who speaks harshly” [Gen. 42:7], “outsider” (בֶּן-נֹכְרִי -- *ben nekhar*) [Gen 17:12], “alien gods” (אֱלֹהֵי הַנֹּכְרִי -- *elohei hanekhar*) [Gen. 35:2] but also to refer to harmless refugees, laborers, visitors or businessmen. Moses named his son Gershom, saying:

I have been a stranger [*ger*] in a foreign land [*eretz nakhriyah*]. [Ex. 2:22]

The Torah says to treat the *nokhri* differently. Examples:

- You may charge or pay interest from loans to a *nokhri*. [Deut. 23:21]
- Debts of a *nokhri* don't have to be forgiven on the seventh year. [Deut. 15:3]
- You may sell a carcass to a *nokhri*. [Deut. 14:21]
- You may not set a *nokhri* to rule over you. [Deut. 17:15]

In Hebrew, the word *goy* (גוי) means “nation”. The Jews are also described as a *goy*. God promises Abraham to make his descendants a “great nation” (*goy gadol* גֹּי גָדוֹל) [Gen. 12:2] It came to also mean “non-Jew” only later and has acquired a negative connotation.

What does the injunction mean and why is it so important?

Talmud

-What is the meaning of “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt”? We learned in a baraita that Rabbi Nathan says: If a defect is in you, do not mention it in another person. [Since the Jews were themselves strangers, they should know better than to demean a stranger in their midst.] And this explains the popular saying: If someone in your family was hanged by legal decree, don’t say to another with the same family flaw: Hang a fish for me. [Bava Metzia 59b]

-It is taught in a baraita that Rabbi Eliezer the Great says: For what reason did the Torah issue warnings... with regard to [not distressing] a convert? It is due to the fact that a convert’s inclination is evil, [and if we don’t treat him well he is prone to return to his previous way of living]. [Bava Metzia 59b]

-"When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him". "In your land" means in Eretz Yisrael. Where do we derive that the law is also valid outside of Eretz Yisrael? From the fact that the verse states: "With you," meaning that in any place that he is "with you", you shall not wrong him. [Yevamot 47a]

Targum Jonathan (1st-century translation in Aramaic):

And the stranger you shall not vex with words, nor distress him by taking his goods. [Targum Jonathan on Exodus 22:20]

Midrash

"You shall not wrong a stranger" means "You shall not afflict him with words"; "nor oppress him" means "you shall not oppress him in money matters."

Do not say to him: "Yesterday you worshipped the deity of Nevo, and [the flesh of] swine is still between your teeth, and you would dare contend with me!" And from where is it derived that if you taunt him he can taunt you back? From "For you were strangers in the land of Egypt". [Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 22:20]

Ibn Ezra (12th-century Spain)

The injunction: “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him” is mentioned right after the mitzvah of showing deference to the old. Just as you must honor an elderly Israelite even though he has no power, so must you deal kindly with the *ger*, who also has less power than you. [Ibn Ezra on Lev. 19:33]

Chizkuni (13th-century France)

-“Do not wrong him” means “Do not abuse him by using him to perform menial labor”. He is unfamiliar with the ways of the Israelites and it would be too easy to take advantage of his ignorance by assigning to him degrading work. [Chizkuni on Exodus 22:20]

-“Do not oppress the stranger” [in Ex, 23:9] refers to treating strangers fairly in court, where they can easily be taken advantage of and have no one to stand up on their behalf. [This is the context of this verse.] [Chizkuni on Exodus 23:9]

The Ramban (13th-century Catalonia)

-Almost a threat: “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” means “You might think that the stranger is in your power and you can do whatever you want with him; but remember: when you were oppressed strangers, I came and rescued you and exacted vengeance on your oppressors. I will do the same with you if you wrong the stranger”. [Ramban on Ex. 22:20]

-“And you know the soul of a stranger, since you were strangers in the land of Egypt” means “You know that the stranger has a low self-esteem, he sighs and cries, and his eyes are always to God. God has mercy on him not because of his merit, but because he suffers. [Ramban on Ex. 23:9]

Or HaHayyim (18th-century Morocco)

We are not to tell the strangers that their intrinsic worth is inferior to ours. [Or HaHayyim on Ex. 22:20]

Translation: Just because God chose you, rescued you and gave you the Torah does not mean you are superior to the “stranger”.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (21st-century England)

Why should I not hate the stranger? Because the stranger is *me*.

Conclusion

Being fair, friendly, caring to the stranger in our midst is of utmost importance in Jewish tradition, given our experience in being strangers ourselves. Perhaps this is a reason why we are commanded to remember our slavery in Egypt and the Exodus every single day, commemorate it in a big celebration once a year, and even act as if we were personally rescued from slavery in Egypt by the Almighty.

Shabbat shalom.