

Parashat Mishpatim: Radicalness Towards Strangers

Rabbi Joshua Rabin, Astoria Center of Israel, Astoria, New York¹

Shemot 22:20	
וְגֵר לֹא-תוֹנֶה וְלֹא תִלְחָצֶנּוּ כִּי-גֵרִים הֵיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:	You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

1. For What Reason Do We Not Oppress the Stranger?

Rashi on Shemot 22:20	
וְגֵר לֹא תוֹנֶה. אוֹנֵאת דְּבָרִים, קוֹנְטְרָאֲרִי"ר בְּלֶעָז, כְּמוֹ וְהֶאֱכִלְתִּי אֶת מוֹנִיךְ אֶת בֶּשָׂרָם (ישעיהו מ"ט): וְלֹא תִלְחָצֶנּוּ. בְּגִזְלַת מָמוֹן:	וְגֵר לֹא תוֹנֶה — means, do not vex him with words (referring to the fact that he is a stranger); contrarier in old French Similar is, (Isaiah 49:26) "And I will feed them that vex thee (מוֹנִיךְ) with their own flesh." וְלֹא תִלְחָצֶנּוּ — by robbing him of money (Mekhilta).
כִּי גֵרִים הֵיִיתֶם. אִם הוֹנִיתוּ, אִף הוּא יִכּוֹל לְהוֹנוֹתְךָ וְלִדְמֹר לְךָ, אִף אֶתָּה מְגֵרִים בָּאתָ, "מוֹם שְׂבָבךָ אֶל תֵּאֱמַר לְחֵבְרָךְ"; כֹּל לִשְׁוֹן גֵּר אָדָם שֶׁלֹּא נִוְלַד בְּאֶתֶּה מְדִינָה, אֲלֵא בֵּא מְדִינָה אַחֶרֶת לְגוֹר שָׁם:	כִּי גֵרִים הֵיִיתֶם — If you vex him he can vex you also by saying to you: "You also descend from strangers". Do not reproach thy fellow-man for a fault which is also thine (Mekhilta). Wherever גֵּר occurs in Scriptures it signifies a person who has not been born in that land (where he is living) but has come from another country to sojourn there.

Ibn Ezra Shemot 22:20	
וְגֵר. כֹּאשֶׁר יִקְבֹּל הָגֵר שֶׁלֹּא לַעֲבֹד עֲבוֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים לֹא תוֹנֶהוּ בְּאֶרֶץ. בַּעֲבוּר שִׁישׁ לְךָ כַּח רַב מִמֶּנּוּ. וְזָכוֹר כִּי גֵרִים הֵיִיתֶם כְּמוֹהוּ. וְכֹאשֶׁר הִזְכִּיר הָגֵר שֶׁאֵין לוֹ כַּח כֹּכָה הִיתוֹם וְהֵאֱלַמְנָה שֶׁהֵם יִשְׂרָאֵלִים וְאֵין לָהֶם כַּח. וְאַחֵר שֶׁאֵמַר לֹא תַעֲנֹן לְשׁוֹן רַבִּים. אֵמַר אִם תַּעֲנֶה. כִּי כָל רוֹאֵה אָדָם שֶׁהוּא מַעֲנֶה יִתּוֹם וְאֵלְמָנָה וְלֹא יַעֲזֹרֶם גַּם הוּא יַחֲשֵׁב מַעֲנֶה:	And a stranger- When a stranger commits himself not to worship idols you shall not wrong him in your country because you are more powerful than he is. Remember that you were strangers like him. When Scripture makes mention of the stranger who is powerless, it similarly takes note of the orphan and widow who are powerless Israelites. After saying <i>lo te'annun</i> (ye shall not afflict) (v. 21) which is in the plural, Scripture says <i>im te'anneh</i> (if thou afflict) (v. 22) because whoever sees a person afflicting the orphan and the widow and does not aid them, is also considered an afflicter.

Ramban on Shemot 22:20	
כִּי גֵרִים הֵיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם...כִּי־דַעְתֶּם כִּי כָל גֵּר נִפְשׁוֹ שֶׁפֶלָה עָלָיו וְהוּא נֶאֱנָח וְצוֹעֵק וְעֵינָיו תָּמִיד אֶל ה' וִירְחַם עָלָיו כְּאִשֶּׁר רַחַם עֲלֵיכֶם, כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב:	Because you were slaves in the land of Egypt... you know that every stranger feels depressed, and is always sighing and crying, and his eyes are always directed towards God, therefore He will have mercy upon him even as He showed mercy to you, just as it is

¹ All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

<p>(שמות ב':כ"ג) "וַיֵּאָנְחוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן הָעֲבָדָה וַיִּצְעֲקוּ וַיִּתְעַל שְׁוַעֲתָם אֶל הָאֱלֹהִים מִן הָעֲבָדָה". כְּלוּמָר לֹא בְּזָכוֹתֵם רַק שְׂרָחַם עֲלֵיהֶם מִן הָעֲבָדָה:</p>	<p>written, and the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage, meaning that He had mercy on them not because of their merits, but only an account of the bondage [and likewise He has mercy on all who are oppressed].</p>
---	--

Hizkuni on Shemot 22:20	
<p>לא תלחצנו לעשות מלאכתך. ולפי שאינם יודעים בעניני הארץ דבר קל הוא להונותם הזהיר עליהם הכתוב.</p>	<p>לא תלחצנו, "do not abuse him." We must not abuse the converts by using them to perform menial labour. Seeing that they are unfamiliar with the ways of the Israelites, it would be too easy to take advantage of their ignorance.</p>

2. And What is Our Reward?

Joshua 8:33	
<p>וְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְזִקְנָיו וְשֹׁטְרֵיהֶם וְשֹׁפְטָיו עֹמְדִים מִזֶּה וּמִזֶּה לְאַרְוֶן נֶגְדֹּת הַכְּהֹנִים הַלְוִיִּם נֹשְׂאֵי אֲרוֹן בְּרִית־יְהוָה כִּגְרָל כְּאֶזְרָח חֲצִיו אֶל־מֹול הַר־גֵּרִיזִים וְחֲצִיו אֶל־מֹול הַר־עֵיבָל כְּאִשֶּׁר צִוָּה מֹשֶׁה עַבְד־יְהוָה לְבָרֵךְ אֶת־הָעָם יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּרֹאשׁוֹנָה:</p>	<p>All Israel—stranger and citizen alike—with their elders, officials, and magistrates, stood on either side of the Ark, facing the levitical priests who carried the Ark of GOD's Covenant. Half of them faced Mount Gerizim and half of them faced Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of GOD had commanded them of old, in order to bless the people of Israel.</p>

Isaiah 14:1	
<p>כִּי יִרְחֹם יְהוָה אֶת־יַעֲקֹב וּבָחַר עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וְהִנִּיחָם עַל־אֲדָמָתָם וְנָלוּהָ הִגְרָל עֲלֵיהֶם וְנִסְפְּחוּ עַל־בֵּית יַעֲקֹב:</p>	<p>But God will pardon Jacob, and will again choose Israel, and will settle them on their own soil. And strangers shall join them and shall cleave to the House of Jacob.</p>

Malachi 3:5	
<p>וְקִרְבָּתִי אֵלֵיכֶם לְמַשְׁפֹּט וְהִיטִי עַד מִמָּחָר בְּמַכְשָׁפִים וּבַמִּנְאָפִים וּבַנִּשְׁבָּעִים לְשֹׁקֵר וּבַעֲשֻׁקֵי שְׂכָר־שֹׁכֵר אֶלְמָנָה וַיְתוֹם וּמַטִּי־גֵר וְלֹא יֵרָאוּנִי אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת:</p>	<p>But [first] I will step forward to contend against you, and I will act as a relentless accuser against those who have no fear of Me: Who practice sorcery, who commit adultery, who swear falsely, who cheat laborers of their hire, and who subvert [the cause of] the widow, orphan, and stranger, said God of Hosts.</p>

3. Radicalness Towards Strangers

Rabbi Shai Held, <i>Judaism Is About Love: Recovering the Heart of Jewish Life</i>	
<p>The lesson—having been strangers in Egypt, the Jewish people are forbidden to oppress the stranger—is so familiar and so often cited that it's easy to miss just how radical it is. The Torah could have responded to the memory of affliction quite differently, saying, Since you were tyrannized and exploited and no one did anything to help you, you don't owe anything to anyone; how dare anyone ask anything of you? Might that not have been a natural response? But the Torah chooses the opposite path: Since you were exploited and oppressed, you must never be among those who exploit and oppress.</p>	
Big Question: What is the reward for not oppressing the stranger?	