

How To Treat A *Ger* (Stranger)

Parashat Ekev, 5770/2010

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This week, Rabbis all over this country will undoubtedly be talking about the famous marriage between Chelsea Clinton and Marc Mezvinsky. Chelsea is from a mixed Christian background and Marc Mezvinsky grew up in a Conservative Jewish community. Entertainment television programs have talked about the wedding for weeks from location, to caterers, to the type of dress that Chelsea will wear. I am sure that Rabbis all over the country are sermonizing right now on the issue of intermarriage.

But as I watch television, I see other messages that are unrelated to this wedding. For the past couple of months, politicians on all sides have begun to position themselves on various issues, and one of these issues is illegal immigration and the undocumented workers that live in our country. Frankly, I am quite troubled by the rhetoric being tossed around. Candidates are vying for who will be the toughest on these people, and some are touting the fact that they will bring Arizona's controversial immigration law to our state of Florida.

This week, I want to focus on just one mitzvah that is found in our parashah:
Deuteronomy 10:19

(יח) עֲשֵׂה מִשְׁפָּט יְתוֹם וְאַלְמָנָה וְאַהֲב גֵר לְתֵת לוֹ לֶחֶם וְשִׂמְלָה
(יט) וְאַהֲבַתְּם אֶת הַגֵּר כִּי גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם

You shall love the *Ger* for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

What is a *Ger*?

According to Rashi, a *Ger* in this context is a convert to Judaism. Rashi asks the question, what does it mean to love the *Ger*? His answer is that we have to give them bread and garment. In other words, we should not let them be hungry or naked.

What is interesting to me is why Rashi translates *Ger* as convert. Rashi came to this interpretation from a midrash which related this line to converts and the benefits that they can or cannot receive.

But this line of the Torah actually speaks about something which the midrash does not pick up on. In order to fully see the context of *Ger*, we have to read the full sentence:

(ח) עֲשֵׂה מִשְׁפָּט יְתוֹם וְאַלְמָנָה וְאַהֲב גֵר לְתֵת לוֹ לֶחֶם וְשִׂמְלָה

“but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the *Ger*, for you

were *Gerim* in the land of Egypt.”

This formula of orphan, widow, and *Ger*, is found many times in the TaNaK, kind of like a series. What is the commonality between these three types of people?

The JPS commentary states the following, “Those who have no man to protect and provide for them. They are frequently mentioned as examples of the impoverished and the powerless, subject to exploitation, and the Torah makes special provisions for their protection. That God is their protector is mentioned in Exodus 22:21 and elsewhere. This is another aspect of God's royalty, for protecting the fatherless, the widow, and the poor was a proverbial responsibility of the ancient kings.”

The JPS goes on to explain what a *Ger* is: The “stranger” (*ger*) is a resident alien, the non-Israelite residing among the Israelites...When the Israelites settled in the promised land, the land was divided among the tribes and passed on by inheritance. Resident aliens did not normally own land and depended on others for their livelihood. Because of their dependency, *gerim* were often poor and exposed to exploitation, and the Torah regularly includes them along with widows, orphans, and the poor in appeals and laws designed to protect vulnerable groups.”

Is anyone surprised to see this? This formula is not only found in our Torah, but also in our tefillah. Turn to page 97 of your siddurim.

(ט: יְקוֹק שְׁמַר אֶת גְּרִים יְתוֹם וְאַלְמָנָה יְעוֹדֵד וְדָרַךְ רְשָׁעִים יַעֲוִת)
(י: יְמַלֵּךְ יְקוֹק לְעוֹלָם אֱלֹהֵיךָ צִיּוֹן לְדוֹר וָדוֹר הַלְלוּ יְקוֹ)

Adonai protects the stranger and supports the orphan and widow but frustrates the designs of the wicked, Adonai shall reign through all generations, Your God, Zion, shall reign forever, Halleluyah!

This Psalm says that God does these things, but as we know, our Rabbis expected us to take on this obligation to do God's work.

These texts give us a clear message: guard the powerless from exploitation.

With a show of hands, how many people had relatives in this country before 1900? Before 1910? 1920? 1940? 1950?

My parents are immigrants to this country. They came to this land after their families were murdered during the Shoah. My grandfather used to tell my father that America had golden streets, this as late as the 1950's. This country welcomed my family in, but

life was not easy for them once they came. They were sometimes taken advantage of, but they over came the adversity put before them and succeeded in this great country.

Many of our ancestors came to this country as poor farmers who did not know a word of English. This led to numerous scams against newly-arrived immigrants at Ellis Island. In fact, the famous Triangle Waist Company Fire in 1911 in New York City which led to the death of 146 people were mostly immigrant Jewish women who were being exploited.

We are a people of perpetual immigrants, roaming from one land to another. Even though we are doing well now in this country, we cannot forget that we too were strangers in a strange land, we too were taken advantage of.

As we watch these commercials today, what is interesting in all this rhetoric is the fear mongering. We are told that these “illegal aliens” a term that I would prefer us not to use, are exploiting us, using their power against us, when in fact, the opposite is probably more true. Undocumented workers are actually the ones being exploited, they are the ones without a vote, without power.

A “Ger” is a stranger, someone is who is powerless, so how do we “love” them? We often look at love as a feeling, but as I have stated numerous times, Jewish love is a verb. We love through action, and as the midrash states, love is giving bread to eat and clothes to wear.

But there is something else:

LEVITICUS 19:33-34 states:

| Translation | Original |
|---|---|
| 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 the LORD am your God. | <p>וְכִי יָגוּר אִתְּךָ גֵר בְּאַרְצְכֶם לֹא תוֹנוּ אֹתוֹ: כְּאֶזְרַח מִכֶּם יִקּוּק לְכֶם הַגֵּר הַגֵּר אִתְּכֶם וְאָהַבְתָּ לוֹ כְּמוֹךְ כִּי גֵרִים הֵייתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:</p> |

The Torah is telling us that love also means seeing yourself in the other because you too shared the same experience.

Today, I could have talked about a high profile intermarriage that is happening this weekend, but the issue of the resident alien, the *Ger*, is something that is also happening this weekend, and also happened last weekend, and will be there next weekend. It is happening all around us, something we hear about in the midst of the noise of news programs. You may even see *Gerim* on the streets, in your midst. Their fingerprints are on the food that you eat. You are told constantly to be scared of them, to punish them, and to hate them.

But the messages to look at them as human beings and to love them are also within our Torah, within our Rabbinic literature, within our prayers, everyday.

The message I am bringing to you is not another sound bite from from Liberals or Conservatives, rather it is the word of God as presented from our Torah, pointing out to you what has been in front of you the whole time. I come to you asking you to look at others as human beings.

וְאַהֲבַתְּם אֶת הַגֵּר כִּי גֵרִים הֵייתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם

You shall love the *Ger* for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Illegal immigration is a real problem that must be dealt with, but let's deal with it in a Jewish way.