

FROM THE PASSOVER HAGGADAH:

In every generation, each of us must look

בְּכָל-דֹּור וּדֹור חַיְבָּה

אָדָם לְרִאֹת

upon ourselves as though we, personally

אַתְּ-עַצְמָו כְּאֶלְוָה הוּא יֵצֵא

מִמְצָרִים.

were among those who went forth from

שְׁפָאָמָרָה: "וְהַגְּדָתָ לְבָנֶךָ

בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא

Egypt. Not only our ancestors did God

לְאָמֹר: בַּעֲבוּר זֶה

עָשָׂה יְהוָה

redeem from suffering, but also us and

לֵי בְּצָאתִי

מִמְצָרִים".

our families.

NOTE: Essential to the Passover experience is the understanding that one should feel that the miracles that God performed for our ancestors were for us as well. Passover is our opportunity to feel personal redemption. Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (Rambam/Maimonides - 1135 - 1204 C.E., Cordova, Spain-Cairo, Egypt) stated that a person must make him/herself appear as if he/she is currently leaving the oppression in Egypt. As a result, some families have the custom of putting *matzah* on their shoulders and walking around the table.

MIDRASH

The section before "The Four Sons" ends with this *Midrash* on Deuteronomy 26:5-9. "A wandering Aramean was my father. He went down to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a Nation, great and strong, and numerous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to Adonai, the God of our ancestors; Adonai heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. Adonai brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey."

The *Midrash* teaches us: "We must remember the Exodus 'day and night'." Even at night, that is, even in the time of our *galut* (exile from Israel), which is like 'night' - at the darkest of all times, on days when the darkness covers all our horizons - we are commanded to remember the Exodus from Egypt, so that we continue trust in God and expect Redemption. So, too, each individual must recall the servitude of Egypt and the Redemption 'in daytime',

when the light of success shines upon us, and 'at night' when our world seems dark. At all times we must recall the Exodus (Deuteronomy 16:3: "for you departed from the land of Egypt hurriedly - so that you remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt for as long as you live.") and thus gain relief from our worries."

And who is the wandering Aramean, identified as "my father" or ancestor?

Based on rabbinic tradition, the great commentator Rashi identifies this ancestor as the patriarch Jacob, whom Laban, his father-in-law, an *Aramean*, caused to wander and nearly destroyed. The plain sense of the passage, though, favors Abraham (Jacob's grandfather) as the "father". From the first Divine command, *leh-leha*, "go you forth from your land..." (Genesis 12:1).

Abraham was wrenched from his native home and set on a path to the "promised land" of Canaan. He is the quintessential Hebrew ('ivri, literally "one who crosses over"), from beyond the river Euphrates (Joshua 24:2).

Throughout his lifetime, Abraham wanders as a "stranger" and "resident alien", even within the boundaries of Canaan (Genesis 23:4), the promise of redemption withheld until the future Exodus from Egypt. As God tells him: "Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not their own, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years...And they shall come back here [to the promised land of Canaan] in the fourth generation..." (Genesis 15:13-16)

HIAS STATEMENT: "Once, we helped refugees because THEY were Jewish. Today we help refugees because WE are Jewish."

HIAS - Founded in 1881, by Russian Jews living on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, to assist Jews fleeing pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe. In 1904 HIAS opened a bureau on Ellis Island providing translation services, guiding immigrants through medical screenings, arguing before Boards of Special Inquiry to prevent deportations and obtaining Bonds to guarantee employment.

***MISHPATIM* - מִשְׁפָּטִים - "LOVING THE STRANGER"**

Mishpatim contains many laws of social justice – against taking advantage of a widow or orphan, for example, or taking interest on a loan to a fellow member of the Jewish community, holding on to an object (a poor person's cloak, etc.) taken as security against a loan, against bribery and injustice, and so on. The first and last of these laws, however, is the repeated command

against "harming a stranger." Clearly something fundamental is at stake in the *Torah's* vision of a just and gracious social order.

וְגַר לֹא-תֹזֵה וְלֹא תַלְחַצֵּן כִּי-גָרִים הַיִתְם בָּאָרֶץ מִצְרָיִם

"Do not ill-treat a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in Egypt."
(Exodus 22:20)

וְגַר לֹא תַלְחַצֵּן וְאַתֶּם יְדַעַתֶּם אֶת-נֶפֶשׁ הָגָר. כִּי-גָרִים הַיִתְם בָּאָרֶץ מִצְרָיִם.

"Do not oppress (i.e. in a Judicial sense) a stranger; you, yourselves, know how it feels to be a stranger [literally, "you know the soul of a stranger"], because you were strangers in Egypt." (Exodus 23:9)

A stranger, in particular, is sensitive to his or her status within society. He or she is an "outsider." Strangers do not share with the native born a memory, a past, a sense of belonging. They are conscious of their vulnerability. Therefore we must be especially careful not to wound them by reminding them that they are not "one of us."

The second thing the sages noted was the repeated emphasis on the stranger in Biblical law. According to Rabbi Eliezer in the *Talmud* (*Baba Metsia* 59b) the *Torah* "warns against the wronging of a *ger* in thirty-six places; others say, in forty-six places."

Whatever the precise number, the repetition throughout the *Torah* is remarkable. Sometimes the stranger is mentioned along with the poor; at others, with the widow and orphan. On several occasions the *Torah* specifies: "You shall have the same law for the stranger as for the native-born." Not only must the stranger not be wronged; he or she must be included in the positive welfare provisions of Israelite/Jewish society. But the law goes beyond this: the stranger must be loved.

According to *Nachmanides* (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, 1194-1270 C.E. Spain, Israel) the command has two dimensions. The first is the relative "powerlessness" of the stranger. He or she is not surrounded by family, friends, neighbors, a community of those ready to come to their defense. Therefore, the *Torah* warns against wronging them because God has made God's-self protector of those who have no one else to protect them. **This is the political dimension of the command.**

The second reason is the **psychological vulnerability of the stranger** (Moses' first son is named **גֶּר שָׁם** *Ger-sham* (*Gershom*) meaning "A stranger there" but also understood as "I am a stranger in a strange land"). The stranger is one who lives outside the normal securities of home and belonging. He or she is, or feels, alone and, throughout the *Torah*, God is especially sensitive to the sigh of the oppressed, the feelings of the rejected, the cry of the unheard. That is the **emotive dimension of the command**.

The term **גֶּר** - *ger* - itself is undefined in the *Torah*. There are other words for stranger; one, **צָר** - *zar* - a "stranger" {or an Israelite who does things he is not supposed to do and, therefore, "estranges himself" from the rest of the Israelite community (Isaiah 61:5) has a stronger sense of "alien" or "foreigner," - i.e. a "visitor from elsewhere." The word *ger*, by contrast, signifies one who is not an Israelite by birth but who has come to live, on a long term basis, within Israelite society.

The Oral Tradition - **תּוֹרָה שְׁבָעֵל פָּה** accordingly identified two forms of the *ger*: the **גֶּר צְדָקָה** - *ger tzedek*, or convert {today, "Jew by Choice"- Ruth is the classic example}, and the **גֶּר תּוֹשֵׁב** - *ger toshav*, a "resident alien" - one who has "chosen" to live in Israel without converting to Judaism but, instead, agreeing to keep the seven Noahide Laws (*Do not deny God, Do not blaspheme God, Do not murder, Do not engage in illicit sexual relations, Do not steal, Do not eat from a live animal, Establish courts/legal system to ensure obedience to the law*) mandatory on all mankind. *Ger toshav* legislation represents the Biblical form of minority rights. Accordingly, any non-Jew who adheres to these laws because they were given by God is regarded as a "righteous gentile," and is assured of a place in the "World to Come" - **עוֹלָם הַבָּא** - *Olam Haba* - the "final reward of the righteous."

CONCLUSION: To be a Jew is to be a stranger. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that this is why Abraham is commanded to leave land, home and father's house; why, long before Joseph was born, Abraham was already told that his descendants would be "strangers in a land not their own"; why Moses had to suffer personal exile before assuming leadership of the people; why the Israelites underwent persecution before inheriting their own land; and why the *Torah* is so insistent that this experience – the retelling of the story on *Pesah* - along with the never-forgotten taste of the bread of affliction

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"In Defense of the Stranger" - Rabbi Peter E. Kasdan

and the bitter herbs of slavery – should become a permanent part of our collective memory.