

STRANGERS IN OUR MIDST

WHAT IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY AS JEWS TO IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES?

The global refugee crisis has reshaped social structures and redrawn political maps around the world. In America, the debate surrounding immigration and our various responses to it are taking similar effect. What do we believe about our responsibility to help foreigners seeking better lives or refuge? What attitudes or themes prevail in Jewish texts and how should they inform our actions? As the national and global debate rages on, what are our actual responsibilities to immigrants and refugees -- as human beings and as Jews?

OPENING QUESTION:

Say one word (only one!) that comes to mind when you hear the phrase “refugee.”

Or

What is the difference between an immigrant and a refugee? Do you understand your ancestors as refugees or immigrants?

FROM JEWISH TRADITION:

Read and discuss the Torah texts below through the following lens:

“The biblical word *ger* can have a variety of meanings and is often translated as ‘stranger.’ Biblical scholar Jacob Milgrom has explained the *ger* as someone who can no longer return to his original home and so lives in limbo as a quasi-part of someone else’s society. More recently, Rabbi Jason Rubenstein of Mechon Hadar has suggested that the opposition between “*ger*” and “*eizrach/citizen*” suggests that the word must be understood as having political overtones (e.g., foreigner, minority, undocumented immigrant, refugee).”¹

Try inserting each of these translations (immigrant, refugee, etc), or another synonym of your choice, into the verses below wherever the word “ger” appears. What effect does that have on your understanding of these commandments?”

Leviticus 19

When a **ger** resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the **ger**. The **ger** who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the **ger** as yourself, were **gerim** in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

¹ <http://www.truah.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Jewish-Texts-Sanctuary-Intro.pdf>

Deuteronomy 10

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the **ger**, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the **ger/immigrant**, for you were **gerim** in the land of Egypt.

Deuteronomy 24

When you reap the harvest in your field and overlook a sheaf in the field, do not turn back to get it; it shall go to the **ger**, the fatherless, and the widow—in order that the LORD your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat down the fruit of your olive trees, do not go over them again; that shall go to the **ger**, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not pick it over again; that shall go to the **ger**, the fatherless, and the widow.

VaYikra 24

If anyone maims his fellow, as he has done so shall it be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The injury he inflicted on another shall be inflicted on him. One who kills a beast shall make restitution for it; but one who kills a human being shall be put to death. You shall have one legal standard for **ger** and citizen alike: for I the LORD am your God

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Did substituting the words “immigrant” or “refugee” for the word “*ger*” change your understanding of the text? How so? Which translation is most powerful to you? Which is most uncomfortable?
- (b) The text instructs us to “love” the *ger*. What do you think the text means by that? What would loving the *ger* look like today?

ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE FROM JEWISH TRADITION:

Consider the following excerpt written by Rabbi Shai Held.²

In his commentary Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra makes a powerful – and frankly daunting – claim: The status of those who witness oppression and remain silent is the same as the status of the oppressors themselves. In Jewish ethics, in other words, there is no such thing as an innocent

² *Rabbi Held is a theologian, scholar, and educator.* He is President, Dean, and Chair in Jewish Thought at The Hadar Institute, where he also directs the Center for Jewish Leadership and Ideas. Rabbi Held has been named multiple times to Newsweek’s list of the 50 most influential rabbis in America. He holds a doctorate in religion from Harvard

bystander. In a society where some are oppressed, all are implicated. We are not free to turn away. I'd like to take one more step. Despite the ancient world's concern for the widow and the orphan the immigrant did not win such support. Most scholars agree that the Torah is the first to expand the category of yatom (orphan) and almanah (widow) to include the ger (the sojourner, the immigrant). The biblical ger, recent scholarship has shown, is an immigrant who had fled his place of origin because of social or political upheaval.

It would not be much of a stretch, therefore, as my colleague Rabbi Jason Rubenstein points out, to translate ger as refugee. The word ger may well be connected to a biblical Hebrew word for fear – gimel-vav-resh. The ger flees crisis and arrives scared. The Bible mandates us the responsibility not to oppress the ger – and to love him or her. There is much to disagree and argue about regarding immigration law. Good, honest people can have profound disagreements about these questions. But on one matter there is no room for disagreement at all: The demonization and dehumanization of immigrants and refugees is a direct assault on the Torah's view of a good society. We must fight it wherever we see it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What are your initial reactions to Rabbi Held's perspective?
- (b) Do you agree with Ibn Ezra's claim that 'the status of those who witness oppression and remain silent is the same as the status of the oppressors themselves'? Why or why not? How does this belief play out in your life?

MODERN DAY "GER"

The following is one of countless refugee stories. It is an excerpt from a Newsweek article, "Come Hell or High Water: Refugees Risk Death Traveling Through a Harrowing European Winter"

Omid Fatehi Karajo, his wife, Nadereh, and their 10-year-old daughter, Wanya, have made a bold decision. In a few days, they will pile into an inflatable raft and cast off from the Turkish coast in the hope of landing on one of the Greek islands. Sitting together on a sofa in front of their webcam, the adults don't smile much. Omid is busy explaining his story through a translator, his wife occasionally intervening, while their daughter alternates between sitting on them and sliding in next to them, grinning shyly through her mass of black curls at the webcam. "I am worried [about the journey]," Wanya says. "Especially from Turkey to Greece, because the sea is dangerous."...

The Fatehi Karajos used to live in Sanandaj, the capital of Iran's Kurdistan province. More than three years ago, following Omid's arrest and torture for his connections to Kurdish political parties, they fled to Iraqi Kurdistan. But when threats came from Iranian security forces, the family crossed another border, this time to the Turkish city of Eskisehir, where they have lived for 19 months. Despite the approaching winter and the increasing danger of traveling now, they say they can't stay in Turkey anymore, where, as Kurds, they are often targets of racial abuse. Omid says he was assaulted recently by his neighbor. When he reported it to the police, he was

told to leave, that they didn't want Kurds in their country. "The most important thing for us is safety," he says. "We know that there is cold weather [in Europe], but it is better than being threatened here."

Lack of shelter is a problem in Europe and along the Balkans route. Even though sleeping outdoors or in flimsy tents may be feasible in the summer, it cannot continue into winter, which in the Balkans is brutal. Temperatures often drop to well below freezing, while heavy snow can block roads and stall transport. People routinely die of cold; others are stuck in their homes for days. These are the conditions that refugees plan to journey through to Western Europe in a march that many won't survive... young children are soaked, freezing and sleeping in the open due to a lack of shelter and basic services...

The Fatehi Karajos don't have proper winter clothes, but Omid says they will just follow the other refugees once they get to Greece. When asked where she wants to live, his daughter Wanya beams, turns to the translator and quietly says "Oslo," where her mother's relatives are.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What applicability, if any, do the Jewish texts you read above have to this modern context?
- (b) How does the sentence "let the refugee in your midst be to you as the native, for you were refugees in the Land of Egypt" change the way we read this story?
- (c) What is our obligations, as Jews, to Fatehi and her fellow refugees?

TAKING ACTION

Here are a collection of resources which suggest different ways to help refugees:

1. <https://rac.org/refugees>
2. <https://www.hias.org/take-action>
3. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/your-money/how-to-help-refugees-in-us.html>