

How does our faith teach that we should treat 'the other, the neighbor, the stranger'?

(if underlined, it means they have it on the HO)

There are a huge number of examples in the Torah—the Hebrew bible—in which the Stranger, especially, is mentioned. No commandment is repeated as often in the Torah as that of protecting the stranger. The importance of this value, grows out of personal, intimate knowledge, conveyed to us today in the form of memory, of how awful it was to be a slave, essentially to be a stranger in a strange land, Mitzrayim. See Gen. 15:13: (HO)

In ancient times, being a Stranger was not necessarily a treat. The term, “**Stranger**,” comes from the Hebrew word *ger*, meaning sojourner. It is connected with the verb root “gur,” to dwell. The “ger” is a “Temporary dweller, newcomer,” perhaps akin to how we might have felt for the first few weeks of moving to Ann Arbor, or better yet, to how our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents may have felt the first time they touched American soil. The opposite of *ger* is someone who is “homeborn.” So in America, unless you are a Native American, you are a *ger*.

The Torah frequently enjoins the *ger* to be treated with kindness. It also prohibits us, frequently, from oppressing the *ger*. One scholar notes that concern for the protection of strangers was not nearly so common elsewhere in ancient Near East culture as it is in the Torah. The *ger* is often seen as a resident alien, like a day-laborer or artisan; someone who resides in the majority culture’s land, and is totally dependent on their patrons for their well-being.

Scholars believe that the Stranger, or Resident Alien, suffered many deprivations in ancient times. One way we know this, is by noting how often the Stranger is mentioned in concert with the widow, the orphan, and the poor, these being other categories of people who were deprived of much in society.

I’d like to return to the idea that feelings can be commanded, as we see, for instance, in Deut. 10:19, “(HO) Linguistic scholars have noted that in Hebrew, verbs for feelings sometimes refer to just the feeling, but sometimes verbs for feelings refer to both the emotion, and also to the actions that result from having that emotion. Therefore, we see frequent pairings of the feeling of “love for the stranger” with actions that manifest that love.

What does loving the stranger mean? How does it manifest itself in the Torah? In part, we know that it” includes treating strangers as “equal before the law,” from Deut. 1:16 (HO).

We also know that it includes providing food, as we read in **Lev. 19:10**, which did not make it onto your HO—my apologies for that— “You shall not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I the Lord am your God.”

There is little ambiguity in the Torah as to who is to be categorized as a Stranger. As Rabbi Sid Schwarz remarks, Lev. 19:34 “says explicitly that the love you feel for yourself and your kin must also be extended to the stranger, the outsider.” (See his book, p. 78)

The verse from Malachi (HO) seems to be stressing the importance of protecting the stranger by connecting adultery and false witness—both part of the 10 commandments—with maltreatment of the Stranger, and saying that God is on the side of the Stranger—and will “contend against” those who subvert the cause of ...the stranger.”

Both Jeremiah and Zechariah also seem to use this “vulnerability ethic,” as Sid Schwarz puts it, as a “centerpiece for what is required for Jews to merit God’s reward of living in the Promised Land.”

From all of these quotes, we see a pattern of compassion emerge, and not only for the *ger*. Rather, the *ger* becomes symbolic of all outsiders, all who are victimized by the forces of oppression.

I wanted to share what philosopher Martin Buber, author of *I and Thou*, said about discovering God through our connection with another. This is summarized by R. Lawrence Kushner. “For Buber, nothing was more important than the relationship between 2 people. They can be members of the same family or sometimes even complete strangers. When 2 individuals realize, for even just a moment, that they depend on each other, that they are fully present for one another, that they are connected to one another, then they have come closer to God. Buber called this an I-Thou experience, and imagined that the invisible lines of relation joining them to one another also join them to God. All Human Beings *are* joined to one another, and this “all-joined-togetherness” is an important part of God.” [quoted in Lawrence Kushner’s *J. Spirituality for Christians*, p. 33-4]

I also wanted to share what a mystical Jewish take on the Stranger might be, because it’s so interesting. One interpretation that I’ve heard, is to turn inward, and regard strangers, or “others,” as outside or alien *thoughts*. Some of us have parts of ourselves that we dislike, or maybe hate. Part of loving the **stranger**, is coming to realize that *our own* strangenesses, those parts of ourselves that we find most difficult to love, that we may even try projecting onto others in order to protect ourselves, are really meant to be loved, too. How do we love those parts of ourselves, that we think of as alien? How do we regard those parts, or those thoughts, in ways that manifest love? For some, the answer might include seeking therapy, which, in this context, is a holy act. For others, the answer comes in how we pray. The Hasidic masters used to say, “When a distracting thought comes to you in prayer, hold fast to God and break through, to redeem the sacred spark that dwells within that thought.”

This is in keeping with the basic Hebrew notion, which we learned about earlier, that holds that Hebrew verbs such as “love the Stranger” sometimes refer to the action which results from the feeling.

I'd like to close coming back to the present day, here tonight. Judaism might use these texts (hold up HO) as the basis to ask 3 simple questions: (1) Who are today's outsiders? Others? Strangers? (2) How does our society treat them? What is it they lack, that is basic to human need? (3) If we are commanded to love them, how can we manifest that love in action?

Extra:

The word **Neighbor** is somewhat different in Torah than the word Stranger. Lev. 19:18, for instance, enjoins us to "Love the Neighbor as Yourself—*v'ahavta l'rei-ah-cha kamocha*." Here, the word Neighbor comes from the Hebrew root *ray-ah*, meaning friend or companion. *Ray-ah-chah* means "Your friend or companion." Or here, the shade of meaning is rendered somewhat more generally, as "fellow, fellow-citizen," or even "another person," with whom one stands in reciprocal relations with. So while there is this more generic meaning attached to Neighbor, it grows out of the Hebrew root understanding of friendship and companion, much like the word "fellowship" is used today to connote a group which comes together for the sake of finding deep and meaningful friendship together.

One thing that's troubling to me about how Judaism approaches the concept of the Stranger or Neighbor, is that it can be interpreted so narrowly, as referring only to Jews. By tradition, this may be understandable, in reaction to the pervasive and lethal anti-Semitism that plagued Jews since earliest times. I don't think that way of interpreting Stranger is dominant among Jews today, but it does exist, and that makes me sad.