

You Shall Not Oppress a Stranger

The obligation to treat the ‘stranger’ with justice resonates powerfully in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Jewish sages are sensitive to this, noting that it is the most frequently quoted of all the commandments in the Torah, mentioned no less than 36 times, more often than the commandment to love God. Let’s look at this teaching on the treatment of strangers in Exodus 22:20; 23:9.

“You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 22:20).

“You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 23:9).

Two very similar verses. Traditional Jewish approaches to Scripture teach us to greet the repetition in the text with a lively curiosity and prayerful imagination. We are alerted to a subtle difference between the verses. Can you see it? Why does the Torah add, in the second quotation, “for you know the feelings of the stranger”?

Rashi and Ramban—two great medieval Torah scholars—were fascinated by this subtle variation. Echoing an earlier tradition, Rashi says that these two verses in the Torah reveal two different motives for treating the stranger justly. The first verse suggests a motivation guided by self-preservation: *Don’t insult the stranger or you will find yourself being insulted in return!*

Ramban gives another pragmatic interpretation: *You may think the stranger is defenceless, but watch out! Oppress him and you will find others coming to his defence, just as God came to your aid when you were powerless in Egypt.* Ramban’s reasoning is particularly apt

in light of Exodus 22:22-33 which speaks of how God’s “anger will burn” against the one who persecutes the stranger, widow or orphan.

And what is the motive suggested by the second quotation? Rashi sums it up, “*How hard it is for him when they oppress him.*” He appeals to the historical memory of the Exodus deeply engraved upon the consciousness of the people of Israel. It is the memory of past suffering and the consequent liberation that will move the heart to have compassion for the stranger and ensure that the humanitarian rule is faithfully observed.

Commentators wonder what led Rashi to include the motive defined by self-interest when the altruistic, loving motive is clearly morally superior. In answer: because Rashi understands human frailty. An appeal to love and memory is not enough to contain the aggressive inclinations of some people. Indeed, the memory of past suffering can at times lead people to seek compensation by lording power over others as soon as the opportunity arises.

What do you think of Rashi’s interpretation? Can you appreciate how his approach to Scripture brings to light insightful questions and issues from textual details which at first glance appear insignificant?

Reflection

Reflect on the place of the ‘stranger’ in your life’s journey. What ‘strangers’ have you met, befriended, or perhaps avoided? Have you ever felt like a stranger yourself? What does this Torah portion teach you? •

Sources: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem, 1996); Herczeg, trans./ed., *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (New York, 1999); Scripture: NJPS.

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