

Loving the Neighbor/Loving the Stranger – Rabbi David Seidenberg

I. Introduction and the main question:

Why are there two separate commands to love in Lev 19, one to love the friend and one to love the stranger?

1. Lev 19:18: And you shall love your fellow/friend/*rei'ekha* (usually translated: 'neighbor') like yourself/*kamokha*.
2. Lev 19:34: Like a native/*ezrach* from among you shall the **stranger** be who sojourns with you / *hager hagar itchem* shall be for you, and you shall love him as yourself/*kamokha*; for **you were strangers in the land of Egypt**.

The Torah seems to ask us to look inside to find what we have in common with the stranger whom we don't know: we know what it is like to feel like a stranger. Reflecting on that can enable us to find within ourselves common ground with almost any person. The Torah requires us to go one level of reflection deeper, beyond how we feel about ourselves, beyond what might be instinctual feelings, to find the level at which we are the same.

Section II details all the verses in Torah that speak about the stranger. Section III focuses on a debate in rabbinic texts about whether "loving your fellow" was the greatest principle in Torah. But these commandments make an assumption: that we are living in a society like ancient Israel, where the Israelites (i.e., the Jewish people) would be the "native-born" and non-Jews would be the strangers. What about Israel today, where so many people who are not Jewish are native-born Palestinians? The Torah has one possible solution for that: we are all strangers, even when we think we are at home.

The commandment to love the stranger is harder to apply when one is actually the stranger in "someone else's" society. Then one must depend on the law or the ability of others to identify with the stranger in themselves. Or, as the the Enlightenment thinkers aspired to, one can find common ground in our shared humanity – which is the most inclusive principle. In the context of Torah, this is grounded in the concept of God's image, which applies to all humanity equally, also discussed in section III. Finally, section IV includes texts about imitating God, showing that in earlier texts this was only seen as incumbent upon Jews. Only later was imitating God connected to God's image and applied to all human beings.

Note: All the material in part III, sections B and C, is quoted from *Kabbalah and Ecology: God's Image in the More-Than-Human World*, by Rabbi David Seidenberg

3. Loving the Stranger – all the Torah laws about the stranger

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Does the stranger equal the refugee or the immigrant? Different passages can be read in different ways. But any verse that talks about treating a stranger well because "you were a stranger in Egypt" necessarily talks about the *ger toshav* (settled stranger) or immigrant – which would most often include the refugee. That applies to Exodus 22, Exodus 23, Leviticus 19, and Deuteronomy 10 in section A.

A. Longer Torah passages that talk about loving and protecting the stranger (Note: I have retranslated some of these verses but not all of them. You also may want to edit them according to your own interpretation.)

4. Exod 22:21-25 – stranger's rights taught with the rights of the poor

21 You shall not mistreat/*toneh* a stranger or oppress him/*tilchatzenu*, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

22 You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. 23 If afflicting you do afflict him, when he does cry out to Me, listening I will surely hear his cry; 24 and My anger will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans.

25 If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, you are not to act as a creditor to him; you shall not charge him interest.

26 If you ever take your fellow's cloak as a pledge, you are to return it to him before the sun sets, 27 for that is his/her only covering; it is his cloak for his skin. What else shall he sleep in? And it shall come about that when he cries out to Me, then I will hear him, for I am gracious.

5. Exod 23:2-12 – You know the soul of the stranger, for you were strangers

2 You shall not be after a majority to do evil, and you shall not respond concerning a lawsuit/dispute to stretch after a majority to stretch/distort [justice].

3 You shall not glorify a poor person/*dal* in his dispute.

4 When you come upon your enemy's bull or his donkey straying, returning you shall surely return it to him. 5 When you see your enemy's donkey crouching pinned under its burden, and would stop from helping him – helping you shall surely help with him.

6 You shall not stretch the judgment of your poor person/*evyonkha* in his dispute.

7 Stay far from a false matter, and do not kill an innocent or a righteous person, for I will not make righteous the wicked.

8 A bribe you shall not take, for bribes will blind the sighted and undermine words of the righteous.

9 And you shall not oppress/*tilchatz* a stranger, for you know the soul of the stranger, since you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

10 Six years you may sow your land and gather in her produce.

11 But in the seventh [year] you shall release her and let it go; and the poor of your people shall eat, and what they leave over, the beasts of the field shall eat. So shall you do to your vineyard [and] to your olive [grove].

12 Six days you may do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, in order that your ox and your donkey shall rest, and your maidservant's son and **the stranger shall be re-ensouled/vayinafeish.**

6. Lev 19:9-34 – Love your neighbor/the stranger, “Holiness Code”

9 When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not fully reap the corner of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest.

10 And you shall not glean your vineyard, nor shall you collect the [fallen] individual grapes of your vineyard; **you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger.** I am YHVH, your God.

11 You shall not steal. You shall not deny falsely. You shall not lie, one man to his fellow.

12 You shall not swear falsely by My Name, thereby profaning the Name of your God. I am YHVH.

13 You shall not oppress your fellow. You shall not rob. The hired worker's wage shall not remain with you overnight until morning.

14 You shall not curse a deaf person. You shall not place a stumbling block before a blind person, and you shall fear your God. I am YHVH.

15 You shall commit no injustice in judgment; you shall not favor a poor person or respect a great man; you shall judge your fellow with righteousness.

16 You shall not go around as a gossip amidst your people. **You shall not stand upon/over your fellow's blood.** I am YHVH.

17 You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your fellow, but you shall not bear a sin on his account.

18 You shall neither take revenge from nor bear a grudge against the members of your people; **you shall love your fellow as yourself /kamokha.** I am YHVH.

...

33 **When a stranger would sojourn with you in your land, you shall not mistreat/tonu him.**

34 **Like a native from among you shall the stranger be who sojourns with you shall be for you, and you shall love him as yourself /kamokha; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.** I am YHVH, your God.

7. Deut 10:12-20 – Walk in God's ways (Note: This passage leads into the second paragraph of the Sh'ma at Deut 11:13, *V'hayah im shamo`a*)

12 Now, Israel, what does YHVH your God require from you, but to fear YHVH your God, to walk in all His ways and love the One, and to serve YHVH your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep YHVH's commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today

for your good? 14 Behold, to YHVH your God belong heaven and the highest heavens, the earth and all that is in it. 15 Yet on your fathers did YHVH set His affection to love them, and He chose their descendants after them, even you above all peoples, as it is this day. 16 So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer. 17 For YHVH your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe.

18 The One does justice for the orphan and the widow, and **loves the stranger by giving him bread and clothing/ lechem v'simlah.**

19 **So you will love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.**

20 You shall fear YHVH your God; you shall serve the One and cleave to the One, and you shall swear by His name. 21 He is your praise and He is your God, who has done these great and awesome things for you which your eyes have seen. 22 Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons in all, and now YHVH your God has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven.

11:1 You shall therefore love YHVH your God, and keep His charge, His statutes, His ordinances, and His commandments all the days.

8. Deut 16:11-14 – Shavuot and Sukkot

11 And rejoice before YHVH your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name – you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, the Levites who is in your gates, and the **stranger**, and the orphan and the widow who is within you, in the place that YHVH your God will choose...

12 And you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and you will guard and do these statutes....

14 Be joyful at your festival – you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites, the **stranger**, the orphan and the widow who live in your towns.

9. Deut 24:14-22 – Remember that you were a slave

14 You shall not oppress/*ta'ashok* a hired worker who is poor and needy, from your brothers or from **your stranger** that is in your land, in your gates...

17 You shall not stretch the justice [due] a **stranger** [or] an orphan, and you shall not impound for collateral a widow's garment.

18 **And you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and that YHVH your God redeemed you from there; therefore I am commanding you to do this thing.**

19 When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the **stranger**, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that YHVH your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

20 When you beat your olive tree, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the **stranger**, for the orphan, and for the widow.

21 When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not go over it again; it shall be for the **stranger**, for the orphan, and for the widow.

22 **And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this thing.**

10. Deut 26:11-13 – *Bikurim*, declaration of the first fruits

11 Then you shall rejoice in all the good things to you the LORD your God has given and to your household you and the Levites and the **stranger living within/among you** / *halevi v'hager asher b'kirbekha*

12 When you have finished tithing your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, then you shall give it to the Levite, to the **stranger**, to the orphan and to the widow, that they may eat in your gates and be satisfied.

13 You shall say before the LORD your God, "I have removed the sacred from my house, and I have given it to the Levite and to the **stranger**, to the orphan and to the widow, according to all Your commandments which You have commanded me; I have not veered from Your commandments and I have not forgotten."

11. See also the passage that tells the story of the Haggadah, Deut. 26:5-8. For a full haggadah including this passage, go to:
<http://neohasid.org/zman/pesach/InnerSeder/>

B. Shorter passages about the stranger

12. Exod. 20:7-10 – the stranger must rest on Shabbat

Remember the day of shabbat to make it holy. Six days you will work and do all your craft. And the seventh day is a shabbat for YHVH your God; you will not do any work, you and your [children and servants] and your animal and your stranger in your gates.

13. Lev 23:22 – harvest

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the **stranger living-as-a-stranger among you** / *hager hagar b'tokham*. I am YHVH your God.

14. Lev 25:23 – you are all strangers

The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is Mine and you are **strangers/gerim** and (temporary) settlers/*toshavim* with Me.

15. Lev 25:35 – support a brother as well as you would support a stranger

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If your brother is made low and his hand slips with you, then you will strengthen him – [as] a **stranger** or settler/*ger v'toshav*, he will live with you.

16. Deut 1:16 – protect a stranger like a brother

And I commanded your judges at that time, "Listen [to disputes] between brothers judge justly/*tsedek*, [whether the case is] between a man and his brother or **his stranger**.

17. Deut 5:14 – the sabbath

And the seventh day is a sabbath to YHVH your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor **your stranger that is in your gates**, in order that your male and female servants may rest, as yourself /*kamokha*.

18. Deut 14:29 – third year tithe

So that the Levite who has no portion or inheritance with you and the **stranger**, and the orphan and the widow who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that YHVH your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

19. Deut 23:3-7 – do not despise an Egyptian

3 Moav and Ammon will not come into the *kahal* of YHVH... forever 4 because they did not come forward to you with bread and water on your way when you came out of Egypt ... 7 Do not despise an Edomite, for he is your brother. Do not despise an Egyptian, **for you were a stranger in his land**.

20. Deut 23:16-17 – refugee/fleeing servant has a right to live anywhere

16 You shall not imprison-to-deliver/*tasgir* a servant unto his master. 17 With you **he will dwell in your midst, in the place where he chooses** in one of your gates where it is good for him. Do not mistreat him.

21. Deut 27:19 – the blessings and curses include justice for the stranger

"Cursed is the one who bends **justice of the stranger**, the orphan or the widow." And all the people will say, "Amen!"

22. Deut 29:10-11 – *Atem nitsavim*: stranger is included in the revelation

You are standing together today... your children and your wives, and **your stranger who is inside your camps**, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water. (see next)

23. Deut 31:12 – *Hak'hel*

Assemble the people – men, women and children, and **your stranger who is in your gates**

24. Deut 28:43-44 – this may be only negative statement about the *ger*

15 And it will be, if you do not listen to the voice of YHVH your God... 43 The **stranger who is in your midst** shall rise above you higher and higher, and you will go down lower and lower. 44 He shall lend to you, and you will not lend to him; he will become the head, and you will become the tail.

25. Lev 25:47-50 (not quoted) might also be understood as negative

It describes what happens of a poor person sells her or himself to the family of a *ger*: his redemption is enjoined on “one of his brothers”, and if not, the Jubilee year frees him.

C. *Ger toshav* (refugee/immigrant) v. *ger tsedek* (convert): which verses apply to which?

26. In Genesis, *ger* can only means refugee/immigrant:

Gen 15:3: Avram is told “your seed will be a stranger in a land that is not theirs”

Gen 23:4: Avraham calls himself a *ger v'toshav* among the Canaanites

27. In these verses, *ger* probably means immigrant/refugee:

Exod 12:48-49: If a *ger* wants to eat the *Pesach* he must be circumcised, so not all *gerim* are circumcised

Lev 24:22: *k'ger k'ezrach* – laws applying to one who kills a person, or one who kills an animal

Deut 14:21: *nveilah* / animal that died without ritual slaughter can be given to *ger* and *nokhri*

Num 15:14-16: offering can be brought *lakhem v'lager*

28. In these verses, *ger* probably equals convert:

Exod 12:19: any *ger* must remove leaven “or that soul will be cut off from the congregation”

Lev 16:29: fasting on Yom Kippur

Lev 17:8-9: *ger* who offers outside of temple or eats blood is “cut off from his people”

Lev 17:10-12: prohibition against eating blood – if the “soul is cut off from her people”, would that also mean the stranger who by converting has made Israelites into their own people?

Lev 17:15: *treifah* – doesn't this contradict Deut 14:21 ?

Lev 18:26: *to'eivot* – these are usually understood to be culture-specific prohibitions

Num 9:4: who must observe *Pesach*

Num 9:14: one law *lakhem v'lager ul'ezrach ha'aretz*

Num 15:30: soul cut off from her people if one acts *b'yad ramah* / “with a high hand” (= sinning with the intention to do it because it is a sin)

Num 19:20: ashes of the *parah adumah* / red heifer

Num 35:15: *ir miklat* / city of refuge

29. In these verses, the meaning of stranger is ambiguous:

Exod 12:49: *k'ger k'ezrach* – one law for the native born and the stranger

Lev 17:13: *kisui dam* / command to bury the blood of a wild animal

Lev 20:2: none may pass their children through the fire for Molekh

Lev 22:18-19: an offering without blemish

Lev 24:16: the punishment for blasphemy

Num 15:26: Yom Kippur atones for *kol adat b'nei Yisrael v'hager hager b'tokham* / all the children of Israel and the stranger living as a stranger among them (note: this is the verse used in Kol Nidrei)

Num 15:29: the offering for an error

II. Some Rabbinic texts

A. Commentary on Torah verses about the stranger:

30. Nachmanides (quoted from Jonathan Sacks <http://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-5768-mishpatim-loving-the-stranger/>):

The correct interpretation [of Exodus 22:21] appears to me to be that the One is saying: do not wrong a stranger or oppress him, thinking as you might that none can deliver him out of your hand; for you know that you were strangers in the land of Egypt and I saw the oppression with which the Egyptian oppressed you, and I avenged your cause on them, because I behold the tears of such who are oppressed and have no comforter, and on the side of their oppressors there is power, and I deliver each one from him that is too strong for him. Likewise you shall not afflict the widow and the orphan for I will hear their cry, for all these people do not rely upon themselves but trust in Me.

And in another verse the One added this reason: for you know what it feels like to be a stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt. That is to say, you know that every stranger feels depressed, and is always sighing and crying, and his eyes are always directed towards God, therefore the One will have mercy upon him even as the One showed mercy to you, as it is written, and the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up to God by reason of the bondage, meaning that the One had mercy on

them, not because of their merits but only on account of the bondage [and likewise the One has mercy on all who are oppressed.]

B. “Love your fellow/neighbor” and “God’s image” as contrasting/complementary principles

The following texts are different versions of a debate about whether “Love your fellow/neighbor” or “God’s image” is the most important principle in the Torah. The principle of God’s image can be understood as a proxy or a more abstract version of “love the stranger”.

What the debate was about is not explicit in the earlier texts. Later commentaries point out that “God’s image” refers to all human beings, whereas “neighbor” may include only fellow Jews. Similarly, the ability to fulfill the command to “love (anyone) as yourself” could depend on how a person subjectively feels about themselves, whereas God’s image would objectively apply to all human beings. More broadly, God’s image would imply a universal obligation to respect all human beings, and so it would also include the stranger.

31. R’ Akiva says: “And you will love your fellow/friend (usually trans.: ‘neighbor’) like yourself” (Lev 19:18)—this is a great principle in the Torah. Ben Azai says: “This is the book of Adam’s generations [. . . in Elohim’s (God’s) likeness He made him]” (Gen 5:1)—this is a greater principle than this (than “love your fellow”). (*Torat Kohanim, Sifra Q’doshim* 4:12, 42b)

32. Said R’ Akiva: They said a great principle in the Torah: “And you will love your fellow like yourself”. And Ben Azai added: And it said something greater than this, and so it’s written: “in Elohim’s image the One made the human” (Gen 9:6). (David Darshan’s version, quoted in his 16th cent. commentary on *Talmud Yerushalmi Nedarim* 9:4, 41b)

33. R’ Akiva said: “And you will love your fellow like yourself”—this is a great principle in the Torah. Ben Azai said: “This is the book of the generations of Adam”—this is a greater principle in the Torah, for you shouldn’t say: Since I was despised, let my friend be despised. Said R’ Tanchuma: If you did so (despise your friend), know whom you despise, [for] “in Elohim’s likeness He made him”. (*Genesis Rabbah* 24:7 – Theodor’s reconstruction of *Genesis Rabbah* based on manuscripts)

34. All [people] are the generations of Adam, [so] also all of us are in one image, in one *chotam*, in one *tsurah*. We are also sealed/stamped with the likeness of Elohim, and we need to treat another with the honor and dignity/*silsul* [due] Elohim, and not to shame our fellow. (*Derekh Haqodesh*, Vidal Tsarfati, d.1619, Morocco)

C. Walking in God’s ways or *imitatio Dei*

Deut. 10:18-19 says, “The One does justice for the orphan and the widow, and loves the stranger by giving him bread and clothing. So you will love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” If we are intent on “imitating God”, then that would require us to treat all human beings—friend, neighbor, stranger, immigrant, refugee—as equal to ourselves, because “you are all strangers by Me” (Lev 25:23). Therefore, the imperative to walk in God’s ways, or *imitatio Dei*, is also related to the question of the stranger.

Is *imitatio Dei*/imitating God a Jewish task or a human task? Most verses invoked in in rabbinic discussions of the idea of “walking in God’s ways” apply only to Abraham or Israel: Gen 17:1 (“Walk before me and be whole”), Lv 19:2, 20:26 (“Become holy for I am holy”), Deut 10:12 (“What does YHVH your God require...but to walk in all His ways and love the One”), Deut 13:5 (“After YHVH your God you will walk”), Psalms 25:10 (“All YHVH’s paths are kindness and truth”), Micah 6:8 (“Walk humbly with your God”). Some, however, are focused on the *tselem*, the image of God in all human beings.

35. [This is my God] and I will glorify Him / *V’anveyhu*” (Exod 15 :2). Abba Shaul says: [This means] “I will be like Him—just as the One is merciful and gracious, so you be merciful and gracious.” (*Mekhilta Shirah* 3)

36. Why is it written: “After YHVH your God you will walk”?—And would it be possible for a human to walk after the Shekhinah, and wasn’t it already said, “For YHVH your God is a consuming fire” (Deut 4:24)? Rather [it means] to walk after the Holy One’s qualities/*midot*. Just as the One clothes the naked...so should you clothe the naked; just as the Holy One visits the sick...so should you visit the sick; ...so should you comfort mourners; ...so should you bury the dead. (*TB Sotah* 14a)

III. Here are links to more resources:

37. “The land of strangers: Understanding Rashi’s first comment on the Torah” – article by Rabbi David Seidenberg on the question of the stranger and human rights, which integrates various Torah commentaries: <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-land-of-strangers/>

38. “Immigration in the Haggadah and Halacha” – source sheet by Rabbi David Siff including medieval halakhah: <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/105276>