

## “Strangers in Your Midst”

Workshop on “NIMBY” and Homelessness – RJ Day of Learning January 26, 2020

Jesse Krasnow, Richard Nightingale (Westhab); Rabbi Les Bronstein (Bet Am Shalom)

### B'resheet (Genesis) 21:14-21 – Hagar/Ha-Ger

<sup>14</sup>Early next morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulder, together with the child, and sent her away. And she wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. <sup>15</sup>When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes, <sup>16</sup>and went and sat down at a distance, a bow-shot away; for she thought, “Let me not look on as the child dies.” And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears.

<sup>17</sup>God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is. <sup>18</sup>Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” <sup>19</sup>Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink. <sup>20</sup>God was with the boy and he grew up; he dwelt in the wilderness and became a bowman. <sup>21</sup>He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

<sup>14</sup> וַיִּשְׁכֶּם אַבְרָהָם | בַּבֹּקֶר וַיִּקְחֵם לֶחֶם  
וְחֵמֶת מַיִם וַיִּתֵּן אֶל-הָגָר שָׁם עַל-שִׁכְמָהּ  
וְאֶת-הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּשְׁלַחַה וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתִּתַּע בְּמִדְבָּר  
בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע: <sup>15</sup> וַיִּכְלוּ הַמַּיִם מִן-הַחֶמֶת  
וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת-הַיֶּלֶד תַּחַת אֶחָד הַשִּׁיחִים:  
<sup>16</sup> וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתֵּשֶׁב לָהּ מִנְגַד הַרְחֹק כַּמֶּטְחָוּי  
קִשְׁת כִּי אָמְרָה אֶל-אַרְאֶה בְּמוֹת הַיֶּלֶד  
וַתֵּשֶׁב מִנְגַד וַתִּשָּׂא אֶת-קִלְעָה וַתִּבְרַךְ:  
<sup>17</sup> וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת-קוֹל הַנְּעָר וַיִּקְרָא  
מִלְאָךְ אֱלֹהִים | אֶל-הָגָר מִן-הַשָּׁמַיִם  
וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַה-לָּךְ הָגָר אֶל-תִּירְאִי כִּי  
שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל-קוֹל הַנְּעָר בְּאִשֶׁר הוּא  
שָׁם: <sup>18</sup> קוּמִי שְׂאִי אֶת-הַנְּעָר וְהַחֲזִיקִי  
אֶת-יָדָךְ בּוֹ כִּי-לִגְוִי גָדוֹל אֲשִׁימֶנּוּ:  
<sup>19</sup> וַיִּפְקַח אֱלֹהִים אֶת-עֵינֶיהָ וַתֵּרָא בְּאֵר  
מַיִם וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתִּמְלֵא אֶת-הַחֶמֶת מַיִם  
וַתִּשְׁק אֶת-הַנְּעָר: <sup>20</sup> וַיְהִי אֱלֹהִים אֶת-  
הַנְּעָר וַיִּגְדַּל וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּמִדְבָּר וַיְהִי רֹבֵה  
קִשְׁת: <sup>21</sup> וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּמִדְבָּר פָּאֲרָן וַתִּקְחֵהּ לּוֹ  
אִמּוֹ אִשָּׁה מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: פ

### Vayikra (Leviticus) 19:33-34 – The Ger “As Yourself”

<sup>33</sup>When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. <sup>34</sup>The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the LORD am your God.

<sup>33</sup> וְכִי יִגְדֹר אִתְּךָ גֵר בְּאַרְצְכֶם לֹא תוֹנֶה  
אֹתוֹ: <sup>34</sup> כַּאֲזוֹחַ מִכֶּם יִהְיֶה לָכֶם הַגֵּר  
הַגֵּר אִתְּכֶם וְאַהֲבַת לוֹ כַּמוֹךְ כִּי-גֵרִים  
הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי יְהוָה  
אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

### D'varim (Deuteronomy) 10:17-19 – Walking in God's Ways

<sup>17</sup>For the LORD your God is God supreme and Lord supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, <sup>18</sup>but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing.—<sup>19</sup>You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

<sup>17</sup> כִּי  
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הוּא אֱלֹהֵי הָאֱלֹהִים וְאֲדֹנֵי  
הָאֲדֹנִים הָאֵל הַגָּדֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא אֲשֶׁר  
לֹא-יִשָּׂא פָנִים וְלֹא יִקַּח שֹׁחַד: <sup>18</sup> עֹשֶׂה  
מִשְׁפָּט יְתוּם וְאִלְמָנָה וְאַהֲבָה לְגֵר לְתַת לוֹ  
לֶחֶם וְשִׂמְלָה: <sup>19</sup> וְאַהֲבַתֶּם אֶת-הַגֵּר כִּי-  
גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

## Turning Memory into Empathy: The Torah's Ethical Charge

Excerpted from *The Heart of Torah, Volume 1: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus* by Shai Held (The Jewish Publication Society and the University of Nebraska Press. ©2017)

One of the Torah's central projects is to turn memory into empathy and moral responsibility. Appealing to our experience of defenselessness in Egypt, the Torah seeks to transform us into people who see those who are vulnerable and exposed rather than looking past them.

Parashat Mishpatim contains perhaps the most well-known articulation of this charge: "You shall not oppress a stranger (*ger*), for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exod. 23:9; see also 22:20). By *ger*, the Torah means one who is an alien in the place where he lives—that is, one who is not a member of the ruling tribe or family, who is not a citizen, and who is therefore vulnerable to social and economic exploitation. The Torah appeals to our memory to intensify our ethical obligations: Having tasted the suffering and degradation to which vulnerability can lead, we are bidden not to oppress the stranger.

The Torah's call is not based on a rational argument, but on an urgent demand for empathy: Since you know what it feels like to be a stranger, you must never abuse or mistreat the stranger...

...Where Exodus commands us not to oppress the stranger and ties that obligation to the ways memory can be harnessed to yield empathy, Leviticus goes further, moving from a negative commandment (*lo ta'aseh*) to a positive one (*aseh*): "When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God" (Lev. 19:33–34). With these startling words, we have traveled a long distance; we are mandated to actively love the stranger...

...Deuteronomy subtly introduces still another dimension to our obligation to love the stranger. Along the way it offers a remarkably moving lesson in theology: "For the Lord your God is God supreme and Lord supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. You too must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deut. 10:17–19)...

... Deuteronomy gives us two distinct but intertwined reasons for what lies at the heart of Jewish ethics: we must love the stranger both because of who God is and because of what we ourselves have been through...

...Exodus teaches us the baseline requirement: not to oppress the stranger. Leviticus magnifies the demand: Not only must we not oppress the stranger, we must actively love the stranger. And Deuteronomy raises the stakes even higher: Loving the stranger is a crucial form of "walking in God's ways."...

...The obligation to love and care for the stranger and the dispossessed is a basic covenantal requirement incumbent upon us as Jews. We surely have moral obligations that are incumbent upon us because of the simple fact that we are human beings. In its recurrent appeals to memory, the Torah seeks to amplify and intensify those obligations, to remind us, even when it is difficult to hear, that the fate of the stranger is our responsibility.

## God Loves the Stranger: Introduction

By Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg © 2017 by Sheila Peltz Weinberg. All rights reserved.

*"God loves the stranger." —Deuteronomy 10:18*

When I take these words deeply into my being, my flesh and blood, there is enormous relief. I am no longer struggling to protect the limited ideas I have about who I am. I am no longer projecting endlessly limited ideas of who you are. I am free. No one is a stranger. Everyone including my so-called enemies is an infinitely complex and precious creature. My labels, categories, and strategies to protect myself from them are paltry in comparison with their sacred mystery.

In our everyday lives, the stranger is sometimes the refugee, sometimes the person of color, age, youth, accent, small or large body, deafness, blindness, baldness, or different view, different neighborhood, different family or lover, profession, or power. There is no limit to who the stranger can be. In fact, some of our most challenging strangers may be those we live with and those we have loved or tried to love.

To see and understand this is the purpose of practice. To provide the social and cultural conditions to deepen this understanding is the purpose of all efforts toward justice and peace. The idea that God loves the stranger unites our inner work and our outer work. The inner work shines light, again and again, on the false conclusions I draw about my self. When I look carefully, calmly, through the lens of divine love, I see that I am none of these labels. I am indeed a stranger even to my own awareness. Now I inhabit this mood, this moment of joy or sadness, fear or envy, generosity, clarity, or confusion. Then it changes.

When I remember that God loves the stranger, the very category of stranger ceases to have meaning. God's love is undifferentiated, unconfined, unlimited. It is an expression of the reality of deepest unity and interconnection of all life in the cosmos, drawn from a single source, ever spiraling, expanding, and returning. All other beings are working with their own limited ideas of who they are and who I am, just as I am working with mine. There is no difference that is substantial.

When I am receptive to the love of the stranger who lives within my own heart and mind, I can extend this love to the other, to one I think I know and to one I do not know. Without exception. This attitude aspires to create a world that is moving toward a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities, a world of respect and sharing, a world saturated with the recognition of unity and love. This is a world where Black lives really matter and a refugee is received with interest, care, and empathy...

## Hagar the Stranger

*Posted on August 17, 2017*

By Rabbi Jonathan Kligler

...Because the Torah is written without vowels, it is possible to pronounce the words in multiple ways, and this is a key to finding implied meanings. So, the name Hagar can also be read ha-ger, the stranger, the foreigner, the Other. Then, instead of "Hagar hamitzrit," Hagar the Egyptian, we read "Ha-ger hamitzrit," the stranger from Egypt. Hagar is now no longer merely an individual character, she is the first appearance of perhaps the key archetype of the Torah: the stranger. And she becomes the first example of one of the Torah's great questions: How do we treat the stranger?...

...The Torah repeats the instruction to care for the stranger at least 33 times, far more than any other commandment in the Torah. It seems to me that when a rule is repeated over and over and over again, it is not only because it is important, it is because people are having trouble following the instruction! We are terrible at following the instruction of caring for the stranger. Again, what's in it for us? And so, God calls upon us repeatedly to develop empathy: do not oppress the stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt....How do we develop empathy? How do we identify with the powerless, whom the Torah typically refers to as the stranger, the slave, the orphan, and the widow?

Which brings us back to Hagar. She is the first stranger in the Torah. She is also a maidservant, a slave. And she is an Egyptian. In the worldview of the Torah, the harmful actions we perpetrate upon others invariably redound back upon us. Many readers have wondered about the cruelty of this story: after Sarah's son Isaac is weaned, Sarah sees Ishmael, Hagar's son, laughing or playing with Isaac, and she says to Abraham, "Get rid of this servant and her son!" Sarah seems petty, Abraham passive, and worst of all, God tells Abraham to do as Sarah says! But this is more than an ancient family drama with an inscrutable deity making capricious demands. The treatment that Abraham and Sarah perpetrate upon Hagar the Egyptian and her son Ishmael sets into motion the events that will eventually lead the descendants of Abraham's other son Isaac to become strangers and slaves themselves in the land of Egypt. And without our sojourn in Egypt, our people's deepest wisdom, our mature empathy, could never have been formed...

...When Hagar and Ishmael are cast out into the wilderness, and the lad is dying of thirst and crying, Hagar goes and sits a bowshot away so that she will not have to listen to the cries of the child as he perishes, and she weeps. "And God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said: What troubles you Hagar? Do not fear! For God has heard the cry of the boy in the place where he is." In the Torah, the stranger is usually included in a grouping with the widow and the orphan. In the ancient agricultural and patriarchal clan society of Israel, these were the truly powerless: the stranger had no land holding, and no protector, and neither did the widow or the orphan (referring here to a child without a father). The stranger, the orphan, and the widow, and also the slave, had no political power or legal recourse. They were truly at the mercy of others. In our story, Hagar and Ishmael embody all aspects of this powerless condition: Hagar is a stranger, a slave, and effectively a widow, her son an orphan. And God hears their cry. Ishmael's name means "God hears," just as God's name means "I will be with you."