

## WELCOMING THE STRANGER

**A Torah Perspective on the Resident Alien**

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**Introduction**

Nearly everyone agrees that we have an immigration problem in the US. We have between 12 and 14 million people in the U.S. that *do not have legal status*.

Some people view the “undocumented aliens” as a threat.

- They don’t pay their fair share of taxes
- They drain the education, health, and welfare system
- They take jobs and opportunities away from U.S. citizens
- They cross the border illegally; they disregard the law
- Many are involved in violent crimes and drug smuggling

Other people view “undocumented aliens” more positively.

- They pay taxes and social security
- They provide labor that helps the U.S. economy
- They are hard working and entrepreneurial
- They have strong family and enrich U.S. society and culture

We need to acknowledge that there are strong opinions on the matter, but I would urge us to not to get impatient, tone down the polemics, and be willing to listen in order to understand.

The vast majority of “undocumented aliens” are Latin Americans, who come from impoverished countries. They come here to survive, feed their families, and improve their lives.

In return, “undocumented aliens”

- Endure hardship and discrimination
- Take difficult and dangerous jobs and get the lowest pay
- Get cheated out of wages
- Are denied compensation for work related injuries
- Have their families separated for many, many years

To make matters worse, our immigration system is broken. It is a system that is

- Inefficient and enforces punitive laws
- Encourages indiscriminate raids

- Detains people without due process
- Separates children from parents
- Allows worker to be exploited
- Unfairly punishes undocumented worker who were lured here by U.S. companies

The Bible does not provide direct advice for resolving our immigration problems. However, it offers some guidance regarding our attitudes and some advice regarding principles for assessing what might be fair and justice immigration policies.

Today, I want to focus on what the Torah has to say regarding immigration.

First, I will identify the central event in the history of the people of Israel—namely, the Exodus—as the foundation for understanding the immigrant or alien among us. Then, I will highlight several things that the Torah teaching about the alien living among the Israelites.

## A. The Exodus Event

### 1. Immigrants in Egypt

The foundational event in the history of Israel is the Exodus. Exodus is a story about how God delivered the oppressed Hebrew immigrants out of the Egypt to the Promised Land.

The Hebrews had migrated to Egypt to escape famine. They went to Egypt and were guest workers for a number of generations.

However, the Hebrew resident aliens were eventually enslaved. As guest workers, they created a dilemma for the Pharaoh. On the one hand, they provided cheap, slave labor. On the other, they were a threat because their population increased dramatically.

As a result, the Pharaoh tried to kill Hebrew infants to reduce their population and he imposed terrible work conditions to keep them in line. It is in this context, that Yahweh delivered the oppressed immigrants .

In the Torah, we hear a confession of faith, which remembers the suffering of Israel and God's deliverance.

**Deut. 26:5-8.** <sup>5</sup> You shall make this response before the LORD your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. <sup>6</sup> When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, <sup>7</sup> we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.

<sup>8</sup> The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders." (NRSV)

There are two things to note:

First, the Hebrew people are immigrants who are rescued by God. God is in the business of rescuing immigrants.

Second, the people making the confession are second generation Hebrews. They have never lived in Egypt, but they talk as if they had been in Egypt ... it happened to their ancestors, but they use "we" and "us" and "our" language!

Later generations identify with the suffering of the first generation of immigrants ... and this is true today when Jews rehearse this at Passover.

## 2. God cares about immigrants

Teachings about hospitality toward immigrants or resident aliens are rooted in this Exodus experience. There are more commandments in the Hebrew Bible regarding treating "resident aliens" fairly than any other commandment with the exception of worshiping God alone. Over and over again, the Torah reminds the Hebrews that they were, and continued to be resident aliens, themselves.

**Exod. 22:21.** <sup>21</sup> You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien (גֵּר; *ger*), for you were aliens (גֵּרִים; *gerim*) in the land of Egypt. (NRSV)

The word Hebrew word, *ger*, can be translated "alien," "resident alien," "stranger," "sojourner," and is equivalent to our modern term, "immigrant".

"The *ger* ... is a resident alien; he has uprooted himself (or has been uprooted) from his homeland and has taken permanent residence in the land of Israel... he has no family to turn to for support." The alien is vulnerable and listed with the poor, fatherless, and widows (Deut. 26:12; Ezek. 22:7)."<sup>1</sup>

The *ger* is distinct from the *nok-ree* (נֹכְרִי), who are foreigners, but who have not entered into lasting relationships with the native-born.

What is interesting is that the Torah describes the Israelites as "continuing to be" resident aliens, even when they occupied the Promised Land.

**Lev. 25:23.** The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens (גֵּר; *ger*) and tenants (תּוֹשָׁב; *to-shav*). (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> Jacob Milgrom, "Reflections on the Biblical GER" in *Leviticus 17-22, The Anchor Bible* (Yale University Press, 2000) 1416-17.

## B. Priests to the Nations

**Exod. 19:5-6.** <sup>5</sup> Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, <sup>6</sup> but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites." (NRSV)

### 1. God's own possession

Israel was a distinct ethnic group or nation, because they had a special purpose. It is not that God doesn't love other people groups, but that Israel has a distinct role to play for God.

### 2. Kingdom of priests

Israel was to be a priestly kingdom, a "servant nation instead of a ruling nation."<sup>2</sup> They were to devote themselves to keeping the Torah and, in that way, they would mediate or model God's holiness to other nations.

In other words, they mediated God to other people groups—to outsiders, aliens or strangers. In this way, they would be a "light to the Gentiles" (Isa 42:6; Isa 60:3).

## C. Protect and Befriend the Alien

### 1. Protect

**Exod. 23:9.** <sup>9</sup> You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

**Lev. 19:33-34a.**<sup>33</sup> When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. <sup>34</sup> The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen (עֲרָבִים; 'ez-rach) among you.

Exod. 23:9 encourages Israelites to empathize with resident aliens. They are to be compassionate toward aliens.

Generally speaking, aliens don't know the local customs, laws, or practices. So they are a disadvantage. They can be exploited. The Israelites—who are to be a light to the Gentiles—are to protect aliens in their midst. That's compassion.

<sup>2</sup> Quoting Durham by Terence Fretheim, *Exodus, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Know, 1991) 212

Lev. 19:33-34a encourages Israelites to treat the aliens as native-born citizens. The Hebrew word is *'ez-rach* and it can be translated "native," "native born," or "native citizen."

The native born person is to treat the immigrant with the same respect, same justice and same value as themselves.

The Torah goes further than that. The Torah tells us, "You must befriend" the alien.

## 2. Befriend

**Lev. 19:34b.** You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. (NRSV)

"You shall love" (אָהַבְתָּ; *'a·hav·tah*) can be translated, "You must befriend."<sup>3</sup> The term implies an obligation, commitment, reaching out—not only a fellow Israelite but also to the resident alien.

This text calls us to get to know immigrants personally. When you get to know someone personally, you begin to understand their struggles. Only when you get to know someone can you begin love them and want them to be treated fairly.

## D. Rights and Responsibilities of the Alien

**Exod. 12:49.**<sup>49</sup> There shall be one law for the native (אֶזְרָח; *'ez-rach*) and for the alien (גֵּר; *ger*) who resides among you. (NRSV)

**Num. 15:16.** You and the alien who resides with you shall have the same law (תּוֹרָה; *torah*) and the same ordinance (מִשְׁפָּט; *mishpat*). (NRSV)

### 1. Rights

The alien has the same rights as the native born. According to the Torah, the native born Israelite and the alien are governed by the same law (Torah) and the same ordinance (*misphat*).

- *Torah* (תּוֹרָה) refers to religious law; the Mosaic law or instruction
- *Misphat* (מִשְׁפָּט) refers to civil law; a judgment or legal decision<sup>4</sup>

This means that the legal status of alien matches that of the Israelite. There is no double standard, one for the native born and one for the alien.

<sup>3</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1418.

<sup>4</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1417.

Both have the same civil rights. Both have the same human rights. Human courts of justice, and those who enforce the law, should do so impartially.

## 2. Responsibilities

The alien has responsibilities, just like the native born Israelite. Both are to keep the law and moral obligations of that society.

If we are influenced by the values of the Torah, then resident aliens in the US are to have the same rights and responsibilities as the native born.<sup>5</sup>

## E. Everyone is an Alien and Guest in God's Land

**Lev. 25:23-24.**<sup>23</sup> The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.<sup>24</sup> Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land. (NRSV)

This text suggests that material possessions, including land, do not belong to us. They belong to God. Notice that the Israelites were considered "guest workers" on God's land even after occupying the Promised Land. It suggests that we also are guest workers wherever we live. We are to be responsible tenants and not presume that where we live has only been given to us.

## F. The Unity of God

### 1. The *Shema*

The central prayer and commandment in the Torah is *Shema*. The most famous part of the *Shema* is the first six words:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד:

*Shě-ma' yis-ra-el Adonai e-lo-hey-nu Adonai e-chad* (transliterated).

"Hear O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD is one" (NET; Deut. 6:4).

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone" (NRSV; Deut. 6:4).

A scribe once asked Jesus what was the most important commandment and Jesus replied by quoting the *Shema* (Mark 12:28-31).

Jesus and the earliest followers of Jesus, like all faithful Jews, recited the *Shema* twice daily, once in the morning and once in the evening. Here are four comments about the *Shema* that pertain to our church in our times.

<sup>5</sup> "Such a person is granted the same rights and accepts the same responsibilities as the citizen." Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1418.

## 2. Listen! (שְׁמַע; *Shema*)

Currently, our world is filled with noise, especially about the immigration crisis. It is a sacred duty to listen (*Shema!*). But to Whom?

## 3. LORD (יְהוָה; *Yahweh*)

We should listen to the LORD. The word "LORD" (lower case capital letters) represents the divine Name, *Yahweh*. Many Jews do not pronounce the sacred Name, but instead say, *Adonai* ("Lord") or *Ha-Shem* ("The Name").

## 4. The LORD is our God

Literally, the Hebrew says, "Yahweh our God." This is a pledge of allegiance to Yahweh alone. This is to say "no" to false gods, "no" to false allegiances (racial, ethnic, national), and "yes" to *Yahweh*. Allegiance belongs to God. All other allegiances must conform to that allegiance or be abandoned.

## 5. The LORD is one

Literally, the Hebrew says, "Yahweh one." The declaration of God's oneness or unity is at once a denial and an affirmation.

God's unity denies God is two. It denies there are many deities. It denies there are powers beyond God. It denies God's purposes or plans are fragmented or confused.

God's unity affirms one Source and one Sustainer. It affirms a unified natural order, a unified moral structure, a unified field of truth, and—what is very important for our church in our times—a unified humanity.

If we affirm the *Shema* like Jesus, then we stand shoulder to shoulder with all human beings without regard to race, ethnicity, or nationality. There is no "separate, but equal," only "united and one."

## 6. The Apostle Paul

The Apostle Paul understood the implications of the *Shema* very clearly.

**Rom 3:29-30.** *Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one" (NRSV).*

The implications are undeniable. We need only swap a couple of Paul's terms to see the implications of the *Shema* for our church in our times.

*"Is God the God of American citizens only? Is he not the God of Latin Americans also? Yes, of Latin Americans also, since God is one."*

The *Shema* affirms the unity of God and the unity of all God's people. The *Shema* is a declaration of faith, a pledge of allegiance, and a call for action.

## **G. Summary**

1. The most important event in the history of Israel is about immigrants. Exodus is a story about how God delivered the Hebrew immigrants out of the Egypt.
2. As a response, Israel had a duty to be God's people and model God's character (holiness) so other nations—foreigners and outsiders—would know God.
3. Native-born Israelites had a duty to protect and befriend the alien or foreigner.
4. The alien, living among the Israelites, had both rights and responsibilities.
5. Native-born Israelites were actually aliens and guests in God's land.
6. Because God is One, we are one with the alien.

## **G. Reflections**

Open discussion.