Global Day of Jewish Learning
Curriculum—Love: Devotion, Desire and Deception

Grandma Rose's Magic

A Project of the Aleph Society

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To command someone to love is unusual.

The Bible does not command us to love our parents or our children. The Bible commands us to love our neighbors, God and the ger. According to one Talmudic tradition (Bava Metzia 59b), there are thirty-six places in the Bible that teach us how to treat the ger with fairness and empathy, including the injunction to love those who have come to live among the Jewish people. Clearly this is an important commandment. But the object of the instruction is less than clear.

Ger translates to “stranger.” The Rabbis of the Talmud interpret the term to mean a convert—someone who has chosen to become part of the Jewish People. In this session, we will explore the Biblical commandment to love the ger, and try to better understand: Who are the strangers in our midst and why should we love them?

Part One: The Ger in Biblical Sources (20 minutes)

There are many definitions of the stranger. Who is the stranger? The word ger (גֵּר) in the Bible can refer either to a non-Jew living amongst the Jewish people, a ger toshav (גֵּר תושב), or to a full convert, a ger zedek (גֵּר צֶדֶק). The ger is the stranger who lives within the Jewish community, is subject to the power of the majority, and is vulnerable. They are people who are somehow at the mercy of the larger community. A convert is a more specific example of the ger—one who has joined the Jewish people and is now a full part of our society.

Because ger can be translated as either “stranger” or “convert,” we will use the Biblical translation of “stranger” in the upcoming sources to maintain the ambiguity of the original biblical Hebrew.

We will begin by looking at three locations in which the Bible instructs us regarding the ger. As we read the texts, note the other individuals who appear alongside the ger and consider the insight these passages offer on how to treat others.

▷ Ask participants to read Texts #1 and #2 and answer the questions in chevruta. Chevruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you learn together.


20 You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. 21 You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan.
Ask:

1. How would you explain the logic connecting our history as strangers in Egypt with the commanded behavior towards strangers?
2. Why is the stranger included in a category along with the widow and the orphan? What similarities and differences would you expect among these groups?

Text #2: Leviticus 19:32–34.

32 You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord. 33 When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. 34 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.

Ask:

1. Why would the Bible connect the ger with the elderly?
2. What do you make of the different verbs that are commanded regarding these two groups, that we are to rise and show deference towards the elderly and love the stranger?

This text adds three components to the connection between our treatment of strangers and our having been strangers in Egypt: that we are to love the stranger, to love the stranger as ourselves and “I the Lord am your God.”

Ask:

1. What do you think is the meaning of these additions? What might be the implications for our behavior?

Read Text #3 aloud.


This text adds three components to the connection between our treatment of strangers and our having been strangers in Egypt: that we are to love the stranger, to love the stranger as ourselves and “I the Lord am your God.”
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.

Ask:
1. In this text, which other people are mentioned alongside the ger? Why are they significant?
2. God is described as upholding justice for the widows and orphans and loving the stranger. How are justice and love similar and different?
3. This text also describes that God demonstrates his love for the stranger by feeding and clothing him. What types of behaviors is God demonstrating to us?
4. What makes a ger deserving of our love?

In these three texts, the ger is mentioned alongside the widows, orphans and elderly—the marginalized, vulnerable members of society. These groups often lack physical, economic and social power, and can be easily wronged or oppressed. These verses seem to suggest that the ger is likewise part of a marginalized segment of society; someone who comes to a new society without connections may be treated with mistrust, which could lead to being oppressed and wronged.

Ask:
1. Would your understanding of these three texts change if we translated ger as “convert” instead of “stranger?” If yes, how?

Part Two: Commentators on Loving a Stranger (15 minutes)

The call to love the stranger because we were strangers in Egypt lends itself to varying interpretations.

The Bible is clear in its directive: the ger is someone we must love. We are reminded firmly that we, too, were strangers in a strange land. As Jews, we know the pain of being oppressed or marginalized and, therefore, should not cause others a hurt we ourselves have suffered.

Rashi, an 11th century French commentator, says that it would not be prudent to remind a stranger of his origins since he could turn around and remind you of the Jewish people’s humble beginnings.

Ask a participant to read Text #4 aloud.

For you were strangers in the land of Egypt: If you taunt him, he can also taunt you and say to you, “You too emanate from strangers.” Do not reproach your neighbor with a fault that is also yours (Mechilta, B.M. 59b). Every expression of a stranger (גר) means a person who was not born in that country but has come from another country to sojourn there.

Ask:

1. What is the value to the Jewish people of having been strangers in the land of Egypt?
2. The Jewish people’s history includes many instances of oppression. How should this history inform our value system?

Nahmanides, a 13th century Spanish philosopher and scholar known as Ramban, explains that the Jewish people should be well aware of how God hates oppression and has compassion for the oppressed.


The correct interpretation is that when it says: “Do not wrong a stranger, and do not oppress him,” you should assume that there is no one who can save him from you; for you know that you were strangers in the land of Egypt, “and I have seen the oppression which the Egyptians have oppressed…” (Ex. 3:9), and I took vengeance on them, because I see the tears of the oppressed, who have no comforter, while the power is on the side of their oppressors (Eccl. 4:1) and I deliver any man from one who is too strong for him (Ps. 35:10). Likewise, you shall not oppress the widow and the fatherless for I will hear their cry, for all these people cannot rely upon themselves, but trust in Me. And in another verse He added this reason: For you know the soul of a stranger, since you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Ex. 23:9). That is to say, you know that every stranger feels demeaned, and is sighing and crying, and his eyes are always directed towards God; therefore, God will take pity upon him just as He had upon you, as it is written: “And the children of Israel sighed from their servitude, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God from their servitude” (Ex. 2:23).

In other words, God took pity on them not for their own merit, but only on account of the servitude. According to Ramban, we might think we can oppress strangers because no one will save them. We should remember, however, that this is not true, since God saved us when we were strangers.

Ramban also mentions the widow and orphan as individuals whose cries God hears. He writes of the stranger who feels depressed and is sighing. God will have mercy on him, as He had mercy on us when we were slaves.
Ask:

1. How do God’s actions towards those who are suffering demonstrate what our own behavior should be? Are they behaviors we usually associate with “love?”

Those who have experienced a particular distress should empathize with others in a similar situation. Someone who has never had a migraine might not appreciate the pain of someone else who suffers from them. The Jewish people know what it is like to be a persecuted outsider; therefore, we should exhibit sensitivity to others in a similar situation.

Ask:

1. Can you think of a situation in which your own suffering led you to greater empathy for the difficulties of another person?
2. Is that the same as love?

Part Three: The Stranger as Convert (12 minutes)

So far we have looked at the ger as a stranger. In this text Maimonides, a famous 12th century Spanish physician and philosopher known as Rambam, writes about the way we should approach converts to Judaism.

Rambam wrote a letter to Ovadiah, a convert who was called a fool by his teacher. The letter from Rambam shows the love and admiration he had for converts.

Text #6: Maimonides’ Letter to Ovadiah the Convert

Know that the obligation regarding converts is quite great. The Torah commands us to honor parents and to listen to the prophet but a person can honor and listen to those he does not love. Regarding the convert, we are commanded to love him... That he called you a fool is a great wonder. A person who left his family and birthplace and the kingdom of his people who are in power and he understood with his discerning heart, and he came to cling to this nation that is currently downtrodden because he recognizes that their religion is just and true, can you call such a person a fool? God forbid! You are not a fool but a wise individual.

Ask:

1. Why is the commandment “to love” a convert as opposed to respect or honor?
2. How does this view of the convert compare to our other texts about the treatment of strangers?
Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz also writes of his respect for the convert. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

**Text #7: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. Biblical Images.**

In the Midrash, it is expressed in a parable. A shepherd has a large flock of sheep. A deer enters the fold. The shepherd tells his herdsmen to treat the deer with special care. The herdsmen ask why, with such a large flock, the shepherd should concern himself with this one deer. The shepherd tells them, “My sheep have only this fold, while this deer has the whole world to choose from. Yet he chose my flock, and it is therefore fitting that I should give him special care.”

This attitude sums up many mitzvot [commandments] that require us to welcome the proselyte [convert] in our midst, someone who has the choice of belonging elsewhere and who, nevertheless, chooses to enter the Jewish framework. The convert deserves special consideration and a special relationship.

**Ask:**

1. Do you know of anyone who has left all that is familiar behind to go on a personal journey?
2. Why would converts have merited or needed this extra level of “love”?

**Conclusion (8 minutes)**

While being commanded to love is unusual, the Bible clearly commands us to love the stranger. Our experience as strangers in Egypt provides us with the historical framework to appreciate the importance of this commandment and the moral imperative to strive to fulfill it.

**Ask:**

1. What does “love” mean in the context of loving the stranger?
2. Is love expressed by an inner emotion or through actions only? Are actions enough?
3. Does the commandment to love change the way that you view marginalized members of society? If so, how?
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17 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, 18 but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. 19 You too must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.
**Part Two: Commentators on Loving a Stranger**

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**Text #4: Rashi. Commentary on Exodus 22:20.**

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**Text #5: Ramban. Commentary on Exodus 22:20.**

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