

**15 Years on the Bottom
Rung**

In the dark before dawn. . .several Mexicans slipped quietly into 3 Guys, a restaurant that the Zagat guide once called "the most expensive coffee shop in New York."

For the next 10 hours they would fry eggs, grill burgers, pour coffee and wash dishes for a stream of customers from the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

But for Juan Manuel Peralta, a 34-year-old illegal immigrant who worked there for five years until he was fired last May, and for many of the other illegal Mexican immigrants in the back, restaurant work today is more like a dead end. . .To earn \$600 [a week], [Peralta] has to work at least 10 hours a day, six days a week, and that does not happen every week. Sometimes he is paid overtime for the extra hours, sometimes not. And, as he found out in May, he can be fired at any time and bring in nothing, not even unemployment, until he lands another job...

Because he is here illegally, Mr. Peralta can easily be exploited. He cannot file a complaint against his landlord for charging him \$500 a month for a 9-foot-by-9-foot room in a Queens apartment that he shares with nine other Mexicans in three families who pay the remainder of the \$2,000-a-month rent. All 13 share one bathroom, and the established pecking order means the Peraltas rarely get to use the kitchen. Eating out can be expensive.

“When a *ger* dwells with you in your land, do not oppress him. The *ger* who dwells with you should be like one of your citizens; love him like yourself, for you were *gerim* in the land of Egypt. I am Adonai your God.”

Leviticus 19:33-34

“You shall not wrong or oppress the *ger*, for you were *gerim* in the land of Egypt.’ ‘You shall not wrong’ with words, ‘and you shall not oppress’ financially...”

Mekhilla d’Rabbi Yishmael Mishpatim (third century Midrash [rabbinic commentary on the book of Exodus])

“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...

Having severed his ties with his original home, he has no family to turn to for support. Thus deprived of both land and family, he was generally poor, listed together with the Levite, the fatherless, and the widow among the wards of society (Deut. 26:12), and exposed to exploitation and oppression. (Ezek. 22:7)...

*Jacob Milgrom “Reflections on the Biblical GER”
Leviticus 17-22*

What does Judaism say about immigrants’ rights?

“‘When a stranger dwells with you. . . do not oppress him.’ [meaning] with words. . . for a *ger* who has converted to Judaism is like a newborn child (Talmud, Tractate Yevamot 22a). For in converting, the *ger* acquires a new soul from heaven. . . [the text goes on and says] ”for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” in order to say, “How can you insult the *ger* for having worshipped idols, when you also worshiped idols until you converted [to worshipping God] in the land of Egypt.” And not only that, but this person who converted in your land. . . instantly entered into holiness. This is not the case with you, who were *gerim* in the land of Egypt, which is impure.”

Rabbi Moshe Alshich, commentary on Leviticus (Turkey/Israel, 16th century)

“I have no cover, and no couch, and no work to which I can resort. I am from a faraway place, namely Rahba (in Iraq). I have been here three months and none of our coreligionists has paid attention to me or fed me with a piece of bread. So I have turned to God the exalted and to my master to do for me what is appropriate for every wayfarer and give me as charity a little money to raise [my] spirits, for I am miserable and dying from hunger. Dogs get their fill these days with bread, but not I.”

Letter from a foreign Jew living in Egypt in the eleventh century, in Mark Cohen, Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt

Judaism and Immigrant Rights

Rabbi Jill Jacobs, Jewish FundS for Justice

It is often taken as a matter of faith that Judaism supports immigrant rights. But, as the texts on the other side of the page suggest, the situation is somewhat more complicated than this simple statement might suggest. As with virtually any issue, Judaism says very little outright. Rather than articulate a clear and unambiguous political position, these texts raise questions and issues meant to sharpen and deepen our own contemporary dialogue.

Classical Jewish law offers no precise equivalent to the word “immigrant.” Within the Bible, the word “*ger*,” often translated as “sojourner,” refers to a person who has left his/her place of origin to live among the Jewish people. Though subject to the laws of the land, this *ger* never fully becomes a member of the Jewish people. Significantly, the *ger* is prohibited from owning land; as such, s/he—like so many undocumented workers today—cannot easily accumulate the wealth necessary to move into the economic center. Recognizing the precarious nature of this perpetual insider/outsider, the Bible mandates special protections for the *ger* and cautions against taking advantage of this person.

The term *ger* undergoes a radical transformation in the hands of the early rabbis, who lived in Northern Israel and Babylonia in the first centuries of the Common Era. For them, the term comes to refer to a convert to Judaism. Based on this reinterpretation, the rabbis understand the biblical protections of strangers as referring only to those strangers who become Jewish. Thus, an outward-focused commandment turns inward. In a commentary printed on the back of this page, Rabbi Moshe Alshich (1508-1593) plays with this translation of *ger* as convert and re-imagines the biblical phrase, “you were *gerim* in the land of Egypt” as meaning “you, too, have a history of idol worship, and so should not remind others about their past.” Rather than referring to a defenseless sojourner, the word *ger* now indicates someone who fails to recognize the Jewish God.

For the rabbis, themselves living under foreign rule, it may have been inconceivable to imagine a situation in which Jews constituted the majority and non-Jews needed protection. Perhaps for this reason, the rabbis reconstructed the biblical mandate to protect the stranger as a warning not to discriminate against converts to Judaism. Such is the nature of the world: in times of personal struggle, it becomes difficult to look outward.

Ultimately, the lesson implicit both in the biblical protections of sojourners, and in the rabbinic re-imagination of the *ger* as a convert, is that history imposes obligations. For the bible, the experience of not being fully secure in Egypt obligates the Jewish people, now secure in their own land, to care for those who remain perpetually on the outside. Though we may reject the rabbis’ disregard for non-Jews, we can at least learn from the rabbis that our own history of imperfection should prevent us from feeling superior to others.

Within the American context, many Jews have reinterpreted the word “*ger*” as “immigrant.” Here, the idea that history imposes obligations is extended to reminding Jews that our own community once occupied the position now held by newer immigrant groups.

So what does Judaism say about immigration? Should we read the *ger* as parallel to contemporary immigrants, or should we understand this person as one who wishes to join the Jewish people? What would be the modern equivalent of the biblical protections of the *ger*? Does it matter whether the *ger* enters the land legally or illegally? As some of my teachers used to say, the questions are often more interesting than the answers.

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