



5 ways we meet the 'stranger'

In biblical times, the Hebrew term *ger*, 'stranger,' referred to a foreign-born permanent resident. Unable to fall back on the ties of local family/clan, the stranger could easily fall victim to discrimination. Discuss some of the ways we meet the 'stranger:' the person of another land, culture, religion, gender, sexual orientation. Consider, too, the hidden, subtle and surprising ways we can experience marginalization 'close to home' ... such as these examples which parishioners have shared:

1. "We're the outlaws,' said my sister-in-law jokingly as she sat with two other in-laws at a family gathering. But was it just a joke? Was she touching a nerve in our apparently big happy family?"

2. "I am a shy person, and I stutter. Most of the time it is okay, but sometimes at a social function I find myself among a group of extroverted people, all vying for the limelight and I feel insignificant, like I don't belong."

3. "The new secretary in the office doesn't quite know the ropes and drives me crazy, forever asking me

questions about where to find this and that. But it must be even harder for her being the 'new kid on the block.'"

4. "Once inside the church I didn't know what to do, so I just followed everyone else. At one point we were on our knees and I wondered why. I was nervous, afraid that my religious ignorance was on public display."

5. "Years of living in Australia have been rewarding, but come Christmas, I feel so homesick. I wish my daughter could experience the joyous way we celebrate Christmas in the Philippines. All I can give her are my stories."



Light of Torah
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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Exodus 21:1—24:18

Mishpatim: 'rules'

Why reflect on Torah?

"We recognized that dialogue is not easy, even among those of us who supposedly have a lot of experience in it. For instance, one participant noted that after one of our sessions, although individuals were invited to ask questions, most in fact made statements instead. This shows that even asking questions does not come naturally. And dialogue, like questioning, is a skill."

Thomas Casey SJ, Director,
Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies, Rome (2010)

This quotation refers to a situation of Jewish-Christian dialogue, but it could also be applied to our approach to the bible. How often do we treat the bible as a book of statements, rather than an invitation to explore the text with our heartfelt questions. Yet the Word of God is not a divine monologue, it is a loving invitation to conversation. Through the Scriptures God 'speaks' to us, and we, too, speak to God, engaging with the text, bringing our stories, complexities, joys, heartbreaks and our deepest questions. In this *Light of Torah* series we learn that traditional Jewish approaches to the bible have a lively, skilled way of engaging with the sacred text.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Exodus 21:1—24:18

This week's Torah portion continues the narrative of the Mt. Sinai Covenant. A further code of conduct is introduced in the form of a list of judicial rulings. The list twice makes mention of the obligation to treat the 'stranger' justly. The Jewish sages are sensitive to this, noting that it is the most frequently quoted of all the commandments in the Torah, mentioned no less than 36 times, more often than the commandment to love God. Let's look at this teaching on the treatment of strangers in Exodus 22:21; 23:9.

Tasting Torah

"You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:20 NJPS; see 22:21 NRSV).

"You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9).

Two very similar verses. Inspired by traditional Jewish approaches to Scripture, we greet the repetition in the text with a lively curiosity and prayerful imagination. We are alert to a subtle difference between the verses. Can you see it? Why does the Torah add, in the second quotation, *"for you know the feelings of the stranger"*? With Rashi and Ramban, two great medieval Torah scholars who were fascinated by this subtle variation, ponder this question in *havrutah*, i.e., with a friend.

Touching Torah

Echoing earlier sources, Rashi says that these two verses in the Torah reveal two different motives for treating the stranger justly. The first verse suggests a motivation guided by self-preservation: *Don't insult the stranger or you will find yourself being insulted in return!* Ramban gives another pragmatic interpretation: *You may think the stranger is defenceless, but watch out! Oppress him and you will find others coming to his defence, just as God came to your aid when you were powerless in Egypt.* Ramban's reasoning is particularly apt in light of Exodus 22:22-24. Revisit these verses.

Depthing Torah

And what is the motive suggested by the second quotation? Rashi sums it up, *"How hard it is for him when they oppress him."* He appeals to the historical memory of the Exodus deeply engraved upon the consciousness of the people of Israel. It is the memory of past suffering and the consequent liberation that will move the heart to have compassion for the stranger and ensure that the humanitarian rule is faithfully observed.

Commentators wonder what led Rashi to include the motive defined by self-interest when the altruistic, loving motive is clearly morally superior. In answer: because Rashi understands human frailty. An appeal to love and memory is not enough to contain the aggressive inclinations of some people. Indeed, the memory of past suffering can sometimes lead people to seek compensation by lording power over others as soon as the opportunity arises.

What do you think of Rashi's interpretation? Can you appreciate how his approach to Scripture brings to light insightful questions and issues from details in the text which at first glance appear insignificant? Continue to ponder this Torah text.

Doing Torah

Reflect on the place of the 'stranger' in your life's journey. What 'strangers' have you met, befriended, or perhaps avoided? Have you ever felt like a stranger yourself? What does this Torah portion teach you?



Faith & life

"My grandmother seemed to be forever hoarding things that other people would dispose of without a second thought: empty jars, pieces of string, old rubber bands. 'Just in case I need them one day,' she would say. Grandma had struggled to raise a family during the Great Depression. The memory of that suffering never left her."

Talking point:

Is there an historical 'exodus' memory (of hardship and liberation) in your own family? If so, what impact has this had on present-day attitudes and behavior patterns?

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (NY, 1996); Herczeg, trans./ed., *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (NY, 1995, 1999); Scripture: NJPS.