

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



PESACH KIGERIM Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

Many elements of Torah have as either their purpose or their rationale the commemoration of the Exodus. Only six verses, however, focus not on the Exodus but rather on our pre-Exodus experience in Egypt. My thesis is that while the Torah is not in chronological order, it is in literary order, and that reading the first three consecutively generates a clear moral and psychological progression. The fourth and fifth at first glance seem anomalous, but I hope that by essay's end they will seem to fit seamlessly into the same pattern.

Here are the first two:

Exodus 22:20

וגר לא תונה ולא תלחצנו כי גרים הייתם בארץ מצרים

Do not oppress or torment the ger, for you were gerim in the land of Mitzrayim.

Exodus 23:9

וגר לא תלחץ

ואתם ידעתם את נפש הגר כי גרים הייתם בארץ מצרים

Do not torment the ger,

for you know the soul of the ger, for you were gerim in the land of Mitzrayim

The first verse makes an abstract intellectual argument: what was hateful to you, do not do to someone else. The second verse, however, appeals to empathy: you know not only your own experience, but that of the *ger* whom you are commanded not to torment.

Leviticus 19:33-4

וכי יגור אתך גר בארצם לא תונו אותו

כאזרח מכם יהיה לכם הגר הגר אתכם

ואהבת לו כמוך

כי גרים הייתם בארץ מצרים; אני ה' א-להיכם

Should a ger be among you, do not torment him.

Rather, the ger among you must be treated just like a citizen, and you must love him as yourself,

for you were gerim in the land of Mitzrayim. I am Hashem your G-d.

The third verse moves from empathy to identification, and commands positive love rather than avoidance of harm. I suggest that identification is the stage following empathy, and the verse states explicitly that the intent of the command is to erase the otherness of the *ger*. One must love the *ger* as oneself, just as one must love one's רע as oneself.

At this point we move into *Sefer Devarim*, and the fourth verse can be seen as harvesting the summing up the progression of the first three:

Deuteronomy 10:19

ואהבתם את הגר כי גרים הייתם בארץ מצרים

You must love the ger, for you were gerim in the land of Mitzrayim

Whereas initially the appeal to our experience could generate only avoidance of harm, now it generates love.

The assumption I have made throughout is that our experience of *gerut* was one of oppression, and that we progress from awareness that no one should be treated as we were to imagining and enacting to others how we would have wanted the Egyptians to behave toward us. This assumption is completely upended, even falsified, by the fifth verse:

Deuteronomy 23:8

לא תתעב אדמי כי אחיך הוא

לא תתעב מצרי כי גר היית בארצו

Do not abominate the Edomite, for he is your brother;

do not abominate the Mitzri, for you were a ger in his land.

Here the experience of Egypt seems to be recalled as positive; it generates an obligation to treat Egyptians as relatives rather than as strangers.

The mission of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Divrei Torah and our website, www.torahleadership.org, which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.

It is possible that we have simply been misreading all along. Perhaps our obligations toward *gerim* are modelled on the Egyptians' initial welcoming of the Jews, rather than on contrast with our eventual enslavement. Now that we have read *Devarim* 23:8, I think that possibility cannot be dismissed.

But I also think that our assumption was warranted by the context of the first two verses. In the immediate aftermath of the Exodus, it would be unreasonable for anyone to expect the phrase "for you were *gerim* in Egypt" to carry a warm and fuzzy connotation. So we must be expected to understand it that way initially. In light of *Devarim* 23:8, we will go back and reread, but we cannot understand *Devarim* 23:8 until we have (mis)read the previous four instances.

How is this? Most theories of ethics ground themselves in sameness; I have obligations toward you because you are like me, and only insofar as you are like me. It is because you suffer as I suffer that I must not torment you; it is because we each flourish when loved that we are obligated to love each other as we love ourselves. If you are different than I, how can I know that you don't valorize the experience of oppression, or see love as the enemy of reason?

The French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas took a fundamentally opposite approach. Ethics should be grounded in difference, he argued, not in sameness. To the extent that we are the same, we are replaceable; our infinite value is a product of our uniqueness.

The Torah's literary progression suggests a hybrid approach; Levinas is ultimately correct, but Levinasian ethics can best or only be reached by passing through sameness ethics. One can imagine a fully hybrid ethic grounded in the Rabbinic statement that the *tzelem*/mold of G-d, from which he casts all humanity, differs from every other *tzelem* in that each sculpture emerges unique. *Ex uno, plura*.

We can now notice that the verse in Deuteronomy differs from its predecessors in one other way; it is written in the singular rather than the plural. Why is this?

I suggest that this verse is intended to refer directly back to the foreshadowing of the Egyptian Exile in the Covenant Between the Pieces, where the use of the singular was also unexpected.

Genesis 15:13

ויאמר לאברם

ידע תדע כי גר יהיה זרעך בארץ לא להם

ועבדם וענו אותם

ארבע מאות שנה

G-d said to Avram:

"You absolutely must know that your descendants will be a ger in a land not their own – they will be enslaved and afflicted – for 400 years.

Of course the Jews were not enslaved for four hundred years. To maintain the historical accuracy of the prophecy, we must date the period of *gerdom* back to well before the slavery, and read the verse as sequential: first your descendants will be *gerim*, and afterward they will be enslaved. So this allusion confirms that our *gerdom* in Egypt should not be read narrowly as referring to the period of enslavement, but rather broadly to include the period in which Joseph's Pharaoh welcomed us with open granaries.

The other use of the singular is in Exodus 2:22:

ותלד בן

ויקרא את שמו גרשם כי אמר גר הייתי בארץ נכריה

Tzipporah, the wife of Moses, gave birth to a son.

He called him "Gershom," saying: "I have been a ger in an alien land."

Here we have a very similar ambiguity. Some read the verse as expressing Mosheh's realization that he had never truly been at home in Egypt. But others see it as referring to Mosheh's time in Midyan, and expressing gratitude for his father-in-law's hospitality when he arrived as a fugitive *ger*.

In parallel with Levinas, Professor Michael Wyschogrod and Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks argue that the institution of Jewish particularism was G-d's protest against the idea that the Good is homogeneous and the good of humanity is homogeneity. The problem with their thesis is that Jewish particularism in practice is often about two kinds of sameness: the world divides into Jews, who share ancestry and the responsibility of Sinai, and non-Jews, who share their lack of either.

Avraham and Mosheh represent the familial and national origins of Jewish particularism, and the Covenant Between the Pieces is the blueprint of Jewish destiny. By tying our surprising obligations toward Egyptians to Avraham and Mosheh's experience of *gerut*, and by defining in advance the experience of *gerut* in Egypt as antecedent to the slavery, the Torah seeks to ensure that our formative memory of our time in Egypt does not calcify into chauvinism, but rather serves as a constant reminder to appreciate both commonality and uniqueness. *Shabbat Shalom and Chag Kasher V'Sameach!*

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