
Who Is This Stranger We Are Supposed to Love?

by Michael J. Prival

In the Winter/Spring 2009 issue of *Humanistic Judaism*, Rabbi Tamara Kolton explains that Jewish admiration for the Torah is largely based on the fact that few North American Jews know enough Hebrew to understand what is being said when the Torah is read aloud in synagogue. The violence, xenophobia, misogyny, authoritarianism, and other unappealing characteristics of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) are, in effect, kept secret by the use of an uncomprehended language and the fact that few Jews ever have read the Torah or other ancient Jewish religious texts in translation. Even when a written translation of the Torah portion is provided at a service, it seems that few, if any, of the worshipers pay attention to the actual, often horrifying, meaning of the passage. Rabbi Kolton points out that the knowledge of most North American Jews concerning ancient religious texts is based on “nice little Sunday School stories” and translated “snippets taken out of context.”

One of the most pervasive of these translated “snippets taken out of context” is the repeated admonition in the Torah to love¹ and not to mistreat or oppress² the stranger. These are probably the passages from the Torah most often cited as evidence that Judaism was always a religion that taught compassion for all people as a core value. As Humanistic Jews, it is important for us to know what these oft-quoted lines about the stranger actually mean and what they don’t mean.

Humanistic Judaism is grounded in the idea that words have meaning. We can’t simply assign a new definition to a word and ignore its generally understood meaning. That’s why we don’t worship any god in our services. The word *God* has a widely accepted meaning. It would violate our commitment to integrity to redefine *God* as, say, *goodness* or *love* in order to make traditional prayers compatible with our outlook. Similarly, to understand what *stranger* means, we have to ask what it meant to those who wrote the texts in which the word appears and what it has meant historically in traditional Judaism (what we would today call Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox Judaism). We can’t just decide that “love the stranger” in the Torah means that the Jewish religious tradition tells us to love all non-Jews or all people if that’s not what it meant in its original context or was understood to mean through subsequent centuries of religious teaching.

Both the law of the Torah and the rabbinic tradition were generally hostile to foreigners. To the extent that the Torah taught that strangers were to be loved and not oppressed, it referred to a very limited group of resident aliens. Later rabbinic law extended a friendly hand only to full converts to Judaism.

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The Stranger in the Torah

In the passages about loving and not oppressing the stranger, the word that is translated as *stranger* is the Hebrew word *ger*. The word *ger* in the Torah never refers to a non-Israelite living outside the land controlled and inhabited by the Israelites. Such foreigners are, in fact, treated rather badly in the Torah texts.

According to the Torah narrative, the instructions in the Torah were received from God by Moses and the Israelites while they were wandering through the wilderness on the way from Egypt toward the land that God had promised to them.³ The Torah instructs the Israelites that when they conquer that land, they must kill every person – man, woman, and child – whom they find living there.⁴ Such total annihilations conducted under the leadership of Moses are described in the Torah text for the cities of Arad,⁵ Heshbon,⁶ and Bashan.⁷ All of the inhabitants of numerous additional cities, beginning with Jericho and Ai, are similarly exterminated by the Israelites, as required by God's law, during the conquest of the remaining land under the leadership of Joshua.⁸ This slaughter is described in the biblical Book of Joshua, which follows the Torah in the Bible.⁹

In the Torah, God tells the Israelites that they may make peace with people they would otherwise fight if those people do not live on the land that the Israelites were promised. Such people are to be put to forced labor by the Israelites rather than killed.¹⁰ If these people do not agree to such servitude, however, all their men are to be killed and their women and children taken as plunder.¹¹ The Torah describes the fate of one group, the Midianites, one of whose women was seen with an Israelite man and who were accused of persuading some Israelites to worship their deity.¹² As punishment, Moses ordered all the people of Midian to be killed except for the virgin females, who were taken as captives.¹³

These texts make it clear that the Israelites were not commanded by their god to love foreign people whom they encountered on their journey. The stranger (*ger*) they were supposed to love and

not oppress was, rather, a non-Israelite who lived among the Israelites. But every resident foreigner was not a *ger*. Often a resident of Israel referred to as a *stranger* in some English translations of the Torah is, in Hebrew, called something else, such as *nekhar* or *zar*. Among the various types of aliens living among the Israelites, it is only the *ger* who, according to the Torah, deserves the love and protection of the Israelite.

So, what is a *ger*?

According to the Torah text, a *ger* is a non-Israelite who not only lives among the Israelites but also follows many of the Israelite laws. These laws include the requirements not to blaspheme the name of the god of the Israelites,¹⁴ to refrain from work on Shabbat¹⁵ and Yom Kippur,¹⁶ to participate in such festivals as Shavuot¹⁷ and Sukkot,¹⁸ to abstain from consuming blood,¹⁹ and to perform certain acts of ritual purification.²⁰ A *ger* was required to eat only unleavened bread during Passover,²¹ but only one who was circumcised was permitted to partake of the Passover meal.²² The *ger* also was subject to the laws against having sexual intercourse with specified female relatives, with the wife of his neighbor, with two women who are closely related to each other, with a menstruating woman, with another man, or with an animal – the latter prohibition applying to women as well as to men.²³

The protections afforded to the *ger* included application of the law equally with the native-born Israelite.²⁴ The *ger* was included among those who were permitted to glean from crops left behind at harvest²⁵ and to benefit from the tithe of the Israelites.²⁶ A *ger* could make sacrifices of animals and other foods at the temple in Jerusalem and obtain forgiveness of sin as a result of such sacrifices.²⁷ A destitute *ger* was to be given aid, just like an Israelite.²⁸ A *ger* who killed another person unintentionally was to be given refuge, as an Israelite would be.²⁹ A poor, hired *ger* was not to be oppressed and was to be paid his wages each day.³⁰

Of course, it is not only the stranger that the Torah commanded the Israelites to love, but also

their neighbor.³¹ Not surprisingly, the text is clear that the neighbor the Israelites are to love as themselves is one of the children of their people, that is, a fellow Israelite.³² Although the idea of loving all Israelites may have been a step forward from restricting one's concern to family or tribe, it is still far from the universalism that is usually ascribed to this Torah quote. There is no hint in the Torah that any non-Israelite is to be looked upon with favor except for one who has attained the status of a *ger*.³³

So, in the period from the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt through their settlement in Canaan and nearby lands, the strangers who merited the love of the Israelites were a very restricted group of people defined by the Torah text, namely, foreigners who lived among the Israelites and adhered to many of their laws.

Rabbinic Law

Following the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E., more than one thousand years after the time in which the stories of the conquest of Canaan are set, the Torah-based, temple-centered religion of Judaism led by priests was supplanted by the Judaism of the rabbis, who relied on their oral law. Many early discussions and debates concerning this oral law were written down in the Talmud. The conclusions of the rabbis concerning which of the various points of view in these Talmudic debates were to be accepted as correct were recorded several times during subsequent centuries. One such compilation is the *Mishneh Torah*, the comprehensive code of rabbinic law written by Moses Maimonides, upon which the following discussion is based.

Rabbinic law talks about the *ger toshav*, the resident alien, rather than the *ger* whose attributes are described in the Torah. In the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides explains that a *ger toshav* is a person who accepts the seven universal laws.³⁴ A *ger toshav* is to be treated well.³⁵ In fact, a non-Jew who adopts and lives by the seven universal laws is even granted a share in the world to come after death, along with Jews. However, the acceptance of these laws must be based on a recognition that

they were received by Moses and are written in the Torah. A person who lives righteously according to the seven universal laws for any other reason will qualify neither for *ger toshav* status nor for reward in the next life.³⁶

Furthermore, a person can be accepted as a *ger toshav* only during a time period in which the Jubilee years are counted.³⁷ Because the Jubilee years are counted only when all of the tribes of Israel are settled on their land,³⁸ a condition that ended with the Assyrian invasion of Israel in the eighth century B.C.E., no one has been able to attain the status of *ger toshav* in more than 2,700 years. In fact, because the rabbinic definition of the *ger toshav* was not operative in the time before the Assyrian invasion (the rise of rabbinic Judaism then being many centuries in the future), there never has been a time when a *ger toshav* as described by rabbinic law could be accepted and afforded the protections due to such a person. The *ger toshav* is a class of people that has simply never existed.

However, a convert to Judaism can be accepted at any time, even now,³⁹ and rabbinic law requires that such a person be treated well. Such acceptance requires that the convert embrace every point of Jewish law, without exception.⁴⁰ The right of people who were not born as Jews to, for example, glean crops left in the field is restricted to full converts. Non-Jews also may be permitted to benefit in such ways, but only for the sake of peace rather than as a matter of law.⁴¹ As long as Jews lived in lands ruled by others, rabbinic law recognized that it was necessary to make accommodations so as not to antagonize the dominant group.

Another example of such accommodation is shown in the treatment of non-Jews who refuse to accept the seven universal laws. Maimonides explains that such people are supposed to be executed,⁴² but this rule apparently would be applicable only at a time when courts of Jewish law had the authority to hear capital cases, which had not been the case for more than a millennium even when Maimonides wrote the *Mishneh Torah* in the twelfth century. Maimonides also says that

an idol worshiper is not to be killed as long as he is not waging war against the Jews (though such a person is in violation of one of the seven universal laws – the one prohibiting idol worship). However, it is forbidden to take action to save the life of an idol worshiper, for example by rescuing one who is drowning.⁴³ These injunctions would be applicable in Maimonides' time and also in ours. The need to adjust to a circumstance of Jews living in lands ruled by others is seen in Maimonides' statement that medical treatment must not be given to an idol worshiper, but an exception can be made if one is in fear of adverse consequences or ill feelings if such treatment is denied. However, the idol worshiper must be required to pay for medical treatment given out of fear.⁴⁴

Idol worshipers (that is, polytheists), as we usually understand the term, were virtually eliminated in the lands occupied by the great majority of Jews – in Christian lands by the Roman emperors in the late fourth and early fifth centuries and by the sweep of Muslim conquest through the Middle East and North Africa in the seventh and eighth centuries. Thus, the rabbinic laws concerning idol worshipers would not seem to be applicable after these time periods. However, Maimonides was among those who asserted that Christians are idol worshipers⁴⁵ because of their worship of the trinity, though many other rabbis disagreed and were able to reconcile the Christian trinity with monotheism. As a result of rabbinic rulings that Christians are idol worshipers, the issue of how Jews are supposed to treat idol worshipers remained relevant through the Middle Ages and into modern times. Maimonides⁴⁶ and most other rabbinic authorities understood that Islam is a truly monotheistic religion, so a Muslim could be counted among those who observe the seven universal laws.

Overall, the attitude of traditional rabbinic law toward non-Jews was far from one of love. It was, at best, one of indifference and, in many cases, of contempt.⁴⁷

The Modern Jewish Outlook

As Humanistic Jews, we often find ourselves in great sympathy with strangers, from the distantly related suffering people of Darfur to our cousins the Palestinian Arabs. It is, however, a mistake to attribute such sympathy to a religious tradition that, in reality, had no interest in the welfare of outsiders.

Mainstream Jewish concern for non-Jews began when Jews started to accept the principles of Enlightenment, which are based on reliance on reason rather than on blind faith in ancient religious texts. The Jewish Enlightenment, the *Haskala*, began in the second half of the eighteenth century in Germany with Moses Mendelssohn and his followers and then spread to other Jewish communities. As acceptance of Enlightenment ideas increased among Jews, so did their efforts to achieve Emancipation – freedom from the discriminatory laws found throughout Europe. They realized that Emancipation would not be forthcoming until they demonstrated their respect for non-Jews. Both the desire to prove that they could be good citizens and increasing social interaction with non-Jews were major factors in broadening the outlook of Enlightenment-oriented, Emancipation-seeking Jews. The universalist tendencies of the *Haskala* were brought to North America by Reform Jews from Germany and by secular Jews from Eastern Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These Jews embraced modernity and rejected the idea that they were bound by traditional rabbinic law, as did many of the children of traditionally religious Jewish immigrants to the United States and Canada.

It is important for us to remember that concern for others, including non-Jews, is widespread in Jewish movements besides our own. The underlying principles of Reform Judaism, founded in the nineteenth century, and Reconstructionist Judaism, founded in the twentieth, were pervasively universalistic from the beginning, just like those of Humanistic Judaism. Many in other religious movements within Judaism, even including Orthodox Jews, also have a broad outlook that embraces all of humankind.

Conversely, ethnocentrism and continuing feelings of Jewish superiority can be found in all Jewish groups, including the Secular and Humanistic. But Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews who remain committed to the full body of traditional rabbinic law are, by the very nature of their religious commitment, wedded to an ideology that elevates Jews above all other people and denigrates non-Jews. In this respect, such Jews are similar to fundamentalists of any religion who believe that they have unique understanding of, and thus are favored by, their deity.

To the extent that many Jews are concerned about social and economic justice for all people, such attitudes are grounded in the historical experience of the Jewish people, not in the legal texts of the traditional Jewish religion. As Humanistic Jews, we are committed to understanding our history, including the religion that has been an important part of that history. However, an accurate understanding of traditional Judaism should prevent us from glorifying it with erroneous statements, for example by saying that our modern values of individual freedom, democracy, and concern for all people are somehow grounded in ancient and medieval Jewish religious texts or traditions.

NOTES

¹Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy 10:17-19.

²Exodus 22:21, 23:9; Leviticus 19:33.

³Of course, we now understand that the texts were actually written centuries after the time in which the Exodus story is placed and that the Exodus from Egypt never really happened, at least in anything close to the form and scale described in the biblical texts.

⁴Deuteronomy 20:16-18.

⁵Numbers 21:1-3.

⁶Deuteronomy 2:30-35.

⁷Numbers 21:33-35, Deuteronomy 3:3-7.

⁸Places whose inhabitants all were killed by the Israelites under the leadership of Joshua include the cities of Jericho (Joshua 6:20-21), Ai (Joshua 8:25-29), Makkedah (Joshua 10:28), Libnah (Joshua 10:29-30), Lachish (Joshua 10:31-32).

Gezer (Joshua 10:33), Eglon (Joshua 10:34-35), Hebron (Joshua 10:36-37), Debir (Joshua 10:38-39), Hazor, Madon, Shimron, and Akhshaph (Joshua 11:1-15). The Israelites spared the lives of the family of the prostitute Rehab, who had assisted the Israelites in the conquest of Jericho.

⁹Although the texts of the Torah and the book of Joshua say that the populations of many cities were totally exterminated by the Israelites, the archaeological record indicates that these violent conquests never actually happened and that the Israelites gradually spread through the land of Canaan and surrounding territories. Even subsequent books of the Bible make it clear that there still were indigenous inhabitants in many of the areas occupied by the Israelites. But the commandments in the Torah to kill every person and the repeated assertions that these commandments were implemented indicates that the intent of the writers of the Torah and the Book of Joshua was far from instilling love for these non-Israelites.

¹⁰Deuteronomy 20:10-11, 15. One group, the people of Gibeon, fooled the Israelites into thinking that they were from a place other than the land the Israelites were conquering. As a result, they were all permitted to live as slaves of the Israelites (Joshua 9:3-27).

¹¹Deuteronomy 20:12-15.

¹²Numbers 25:1-18.

¹³Numbers 31:1-18.

¹⁴Leviticus 18:21, 18, 26; 24:16.

¹⁵Exodus 20:10, 23:12; Deuteronomy 5:14.

¹⁶Leviticus 16:29.

¹⁷Deuteronomy 16:10-11.

¹⁸Deuteronomy 16:13-14.

¹⁹Leviticus 17:10, 17:12-13.

²⁰Numbers 19:10.

²¹Exodus 12:19.

²²Exodus 12:48.

²³Leviticus 18:6-26. The stranger is specifically mentioned at 18:26.

²⁴Exodus 12:49; Leviticus 24:22; Numbers 9:14, 15:15-16, 15:29-30; Deuteronomy 1:16-17, 24:17, 27:19.

²⁵Leviticus 19:10, 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19-21.

²⁶Deuteronomy 14:28-29, 26:12-13.

²⁷Leviticus 17:8-9, 22:18; Numbers 15:14, 15:26.

²⁸Leviticus 25:35.

²⁹Numbers 35:15.

³⁰Deuteronomy 24:14-15.

³¹Leviticus 19:18.

³²In his brilliant, readable history of Western religion, *The Evolution of God* (Little, Brown and Co., 2009), Robert Wright makes a convincing case not only that “Love your neighbor as yourself” in Leviticus refers only to fellow Israelites but also that when Jesus says “Love your neighbor as yourself” in the New Testament book of Mark (12:31) he is referring only to fellow Jews.

³³Other biblical snippets often used to support the idea that Judaism has always been a religion of concern for others are several well-known short quotations from the prophets of social justice – for example, Isaiah, (1:17, “Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow”), Amos (5:24, “Let justice run down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream”), and Micah (6:8, “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God”). Traditional Judaism, however, was never focused on the prophets. The only biblical books that were considered to be the basis for the laws that regulated behavior were the five books of the Torah. These brief prophetic quotes and several similar ones entered Jewish thinking in a significant way only when Reform Judaism, which developed in the nineteenth century, adopted them as central to its outlook. These “social justice” quotes are, in any case, not directed toward non-Israelites. The books of biblical prophets are, rather, pervasively characterized by threats directed at, the glorification of violence inflicted upon, and consistent hostility toward foreigners.

³⁴Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Avodah Zarah, 10, 6; Issurei Bi’ah 14, 7. According to Maimonides, these seven laws are: the prohibitions against worshiping idols, blaspheming the Israelite god, murder, incest and adultery, theft, and eating flesh taken from a living animal as well as the requirement to establish a system of laws and courts (*Mishneh Torah*, Melakhim 9:1). These are often referred to as the seven Noachide Laws, indicating that they were given to all people, as descendants of Noah, and not only to the Jewish people.

³⁵Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Avodah Zarah, 10, 2.

³⁶Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Melakhim 8, 11.

³⁷Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Avodah Zarah, 10, 6; Issurei Bi’ah 14, 8. Jubilee years occurred in the year following seven Sabbatical cycles, that is, once every fifty years.

³⁸Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Shemittah 10, 8.

³⁹Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Avodah Zarah, 10, 6.

⁴⁰Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Issurei Bi’ah 14, 8.

⁴¹Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Mattenot Aniyim 1, 9.

⁴²Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Melakhim 8, 10; 9, 14.

⁴³Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Avodah Zarah, 10, 1.

⁴⁴Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Avodah Zarah, 10, 2.

⁴⁵Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Avodah Zarah 9, 4. Some censored version of the *Mishneh Torah* substitute the word “Canaanites” for “Christians,” but the statement that their festival is celebrated on the first day of the week (Sunday) makes it clear even in the censored texts that the reference is to Christians. At Melakhim 11,4, in a passage that was deleted by censors in some editions of the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides says that Christians worship a false god.

⁴⁶Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Ma’akhalot Asurot 11, 7; 13, 11.

⁴⁷One positive statement that seems to include non-Jews is found in the *Mishneh Torah* in a discussion of the Levites, the landless tribe that was given special religious duties. Maimonides says that not only the Levites, but any person in the world, may gain God’s favor if he knows and serves God (Shemittah 13, 13). This statement stands in such stark contrast to the numerous disparaging references to non-Jews throughout the *Mishnah Torah*, including many not cited here, that the possibility must be considered that it was intended to refer only to Jews who were not Levites rather than to all people.