

Turning Suffering Into Love: The Torah's Revolutionary Mandate

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1. שְׁמוֹת כג:ט

⁹וְגֵר לֹא תִלְחָץ וְאַתֶּם יְדַעְתֶּם אֶת נַפְשׁ הַגֵּר כִּי גֵרִים הֵייתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

1. Exodus 23:9

⁹You shall not oppress a stranger for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.

2. וַיִּקְרָא יט:לג-לד

³³וְכִי יִגּוּר אֶתְךָ גֵר בְּאֶרְצְךָ לֹא תוֹנוּ אֹתוֹ

³⁴כְּאֶזְרַח מִמֶּנּוּ יְהִיֶה לְכֶם הַגֵּר הַגֵּר אֶתְכֶם וְאַהֲבַתְּ לּוֹ כְּמוֹךְ כִּי גֵרִים הֵייתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי יְיָ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

2. Leviticus 19:33-34

³³When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. ³⁴The 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.

3. דְּבָרִים י:טז-יז

¹⁷כִּי יְיָ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הוּא אֱלֹהֵי הָאֱלֹהִים וְאֲדֹנֵי הָאֲדֹנִים הָאֵל הַגָּדֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשָּׂא פְנִים וְלֹא יִקַּח שֹׁחַד:

¹⁸עֹשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט יְתוֹם וְאֶלְמָנָה וְאַהֲבָה גֵר לְתֵת לוֹ לֶחֶם וְשִׂמְלָה:

¹⁹וְאַהֲבַתְּם אֶת הַגֵּר כִּי גֵרִים הֵייתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

3. Deuteronomy 10:17-19

¹⁷For 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, ¹⁸but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. ¹⁹You too must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

4. שְׁמוֹת כב:כא-כג

²¹כָּל-אֶלְמָנָה וְיְתוֹם לֹא תַעֲנוּן.

²²אִם-עֲנֶה תַעֲנֶה אֹתוֹ—כִּי אִם-צָעַק יִצְעַק אֵלַי שְׁמַע אֲשִׁמַּע צַעְקוֹ.

²³וְחָרָה אַפִּי וְהִרְגַתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּחָרְב; וְהָיוּ נְשִׁיכֶם אֶלְמָנוֹת וּבְנֵיכֶם יְתוֹמִים.

4. Exodus 22:21-23

²¹You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan. ²²If you do mistreat them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to Me, ²³and My anger shall blaze forth and I will put you to the sword, and your own wives shall become widows and your children orphans.

5. דְּבָרִים כג:טז-יז

¹⁵לֹא-תִסְגִּיר עֶבֶד אֶל-אֲדֹנָיו אֲשֶׁר-יִנְצֵל אֵלָיְךָ מֵעַם אֲדֹנָיו.



¹⁶עמך יִשָּׁב בְּקִרְבְּךָ בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-יִבְחַר בְּאֶחָד שְׁעָרֶיךָ—בְּטוֹב לוֹ לֹא תוֹנֶנּוּ.

5. Deuteronomy 23:16-17

¹⁶You shall not turn over to his master a slave who seeks refuge with you from his master. ¹⁷He shall live with you in any place he may choose among the settlements in your midst, wherever he pleases; you must not ill-treat him.

6. ויקרא כה:כג

והארץ לא תמכר לצמיתת פי-לי הארץ פי-גרים ותושבים אתם עמדי:

6. Leviticus 25:23

But the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me.

7. דברים כה:יז-יט

¹⁷זְכוֹר אֶת אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה לְךָ עֲמֶלֶק בְּדַרְךָ בְּצֵאתְךָ מִמִּצְרָיִם: ¹⁸אֲשֶׁר קָרַךְ בְּדַרְךָ וַיִּזְנֶב בְּךָ כְּלֵי-הַנְּחֹשָׁלִים אַחֲרֶיךָ וְאַתָּה עֵיף וַיִּגַע וְלֹא יָרָא אֱלֹהִים: ¹⁹וְהָיָה בְּהַנִּיחַ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְךָ מִכָּל-אֲיִבֶיךָ מִסָּבִיב בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה-אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ נַחֲלָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ תִמְחָה אֶת-זִכְרֵ עֲמֶלֶק מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם לֹא תִשְׁכַּח:

7. Deuteronomy 25:17-19

¹⁷Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt—¹⁸how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear. ¹⁹Therefore, when the LORD your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!

8. Deuteronomy 23:4-7

Appendix

9. Shai Held, *Judaism Is About Love: Reclaiming the Heart of Jewish Life* (forthcoming, 2024)

The Torah's explicit appeal is to the Jewish people as a whole, and to our shared memory of oppression and degradation. But Jewish spiritual texts also insist that each of us should also personalize the story of Exodus: we are asked to identify our own Egypts and learn to leave them behind. Along similar lines, I'd suggest that we ought to personalize the biblical mandate to remember as well. Each of us is obligated to remember times when we have been "strangers," vulnerable to abuse and exploitation at the hands of those who held power over us. Such experiences are blessedly rare for some people. Tragically, they are part of the daily bread of others. From these experiences, the Torah tells us, we are to learn compassion and kindness.

Here too the mandate is far from obvious. Thinking back on the ways we have suffered, we may respond by wanting to make sure that no one else has to



endure what we did, but we may just as easily feel entitled to be indifferent. If you had been through what I've been through, we hear ourselves saying, you would understand that I don't owe anybody anything. Worse yet, consciously or not, we may grant ourselves license to behave as badly as our former oppressors did. Although it may be tempting to assume that "good people" learn empathy from their afflictions, while "bad people" learn hostility and xenophobia, the truth is usually far more complicated: many of us have both responses at the same time. We all have many internal voices and are pulled in many different directions. As Leon Wieseltier once remarked, "The Holocaust enlarged our Jewish hearts, and it shrunk them." Fully aware that we may well have both impulses within us, the Torah challenges us to nurture and cultivate compassion and to prevent rage from becoming the animating principle of our lives.

The relationship between memory and ethics is extremely complex. As Miroslav Volf writes, "Memory of wrong suffered is from a moral standpoint *dangerously underdetermined*... It is possible to draw rather divergent, even conflicting lessons from the same experience of mistreatment." What we learn will be determined not by memory itself but by "a broader set of convictions about the nature of reality and our responsibilities within it."¹ For the recently redeemed Israelites, the moral and spiritual goal was to become like the God who had liberated them rather than the Pharaoh who had enslaved them,² and thus to learn kindness rather than callousness from their suffering. The pivotal point is that there is nothing automatic about this process. "We are not just shaped *by* memories; we ourselves *shape* the memories that shape us."³ Memory as the Torah understands it is anything but a passive activity. We are who we are in no small part because of how we choose to let our memories affect us.⁴

¹ Volf, *The End of Memory*, p. 31.

² See, similarly, Volf, *The End of Memory*, p. 105.

³ Volf, *The End of Memory*, p. 25.

⁴ As Volf writes, "If salvation lies in memory of wrong suffered, it must lie more in what we do with those memories than in the memories themselves." Volf, *End of Memory*, p. 26.

