



***For You Were Strangers:
Torah Reflections on Parashat Kedoshim***

Leviticus 19:1 – 20:27

13 Iyar 5778

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Passover, with its special foods, symbols, and rituals, is behind us. Over time, the echoes may fade from our shared journey out of slavery and oppression to freedom. And yet, Jewish tradition encourages us to re-amplify those echoes and re-visit that journey throughout the year. The Exodus from Egypt is recalled in the regular synagogue liturgy, and in the Friday evening *kiddush* recited weekly in many homes. *Kedoshim*, the second of this week's double Torah portion, presents another of many reminders that our ancient past includes a sojourn in a land not our own.

In what ways are these reminders so important?

In Leviticus 19, the Israelite farming community is instructed to leave some of its produce in the fields for the poor and the stranger to glean; to avoid defrauding or otherwise wronging one another; to “love thy neighbor as thyself”. A little later in the same chapter, we are also instructed not to oppress the stranger (the Hebrew word for stranger, *ger*, is also translated more technically as resident alien, or in later strata of Jewish law, as convert). In a striking parallel, we are instructed to “love the stranger as thyself”, with the rejoinder “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Leviticus 19:34).

Our history of having been “strangers in the land of Egypt” is supposed to teach us, to sensitize us to others, to move our behavior in the direction of justice and fairness and compassion toward both the fellow traveler and the stranger in our midst. Our Torah and our liturgy encourage us to hold in our hearts our people's historic experience of oppression and injustice and disempowerment. They also encourage us to examine our personal experiences of estrangement, of vulnerability, of feeling like an outsider.

Paradoxically, these experiences may provide common ground that help us humanize and connect with others who appear strange or who find themselves in alien territory. Someone who has felt socially out of sorts or unable to advocate for themselves may be able to draw on that experience to build a bridge of shared interest and support and even blessing precisely where the chasm of feeling strange looms widest. You may be in a hospital bed, or visiting a loved one or a neighbor who is ill or grieving, or starting out on a scary new venture. In each of these situations, one of you likely has the fears and concerns of the stranger, as well as the understanding and compassion of a veteran, which can help overcome the sense of isolation

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and loneliness that afflict so many of us at one time or another. After all, most everyone has been scared at some point in their lives, even if we normally try to keep that hidden. As we acknowledge or act out of that personal and collective awareness, we may be better able to nurture and respond to the holy light that resides within each of us.

Hence, this week's Torah reading gives us another opportunity to reflect – and maybe talk with someone else – about the ways we have found ourselves estranged.

May we all find ways to turn our experiences of vulnerability and alienation into greater sensitivity and respect and love toward our fellow human beings – including both those who may appear awkward or strange, and those who feel the most familiar to us.

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This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Natan Fenner, BCC, of the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center. BAJHC is a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties. To subscribe or to explore other healing-oriented resources, visit www.jewishhealingcenter.org.

