

**Love the stranger....**  
**by Rabbi Mordechai Liebling • April 11th, 2006 • Torah**

When I read, “You should love the stranger, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt” (Deut. 10:19), what immediately came to mind was how similar this is to “Love your neighbor as yourself,” (Lev. 19:18). Many commentators have written about the difficulty of legislating love. I choose to understand these commandments as instructing us how to behave AND what feelings to cultivate, guiding our actions and our kavanah.

The stranger and our neighbor are both ‘the other’, though to different degrees, one radical otherness and the other close enough to more easily see ourselves in the other. To help overcome this radical otherness we are reminded that we, too, were once strangers and treated as radically other. Each of us needs to draw on our own experiences to remember everyday what it feels like to be treated or seen as other. This helps us develop in an on going way empathy, this is how we begin to develop the kavanah of loving the other.

We are being told to remember being victims (slaves) to develop compassion—a state of feeling connected, we are not remembering for the purpose of developing an aggressive or defensive posture—responses to feeling isolated. We need to remember to keep our hearts open to the pain of the other, as opposed to remembering our pain for the sake of feeling “how I have suffered.” Every human being feels pain, experiences suffering. We can use these feelings to cut ourselves off from others and feel victimized or we can use these feelings to understand our common humanity. The tradition gives us clear instruction as to which course we should take.

It is telling that we are to remember the time when we were victims. It is a very common response to distance oneself from someone we perceive as victim. Cancer patients, victims of a violent crime, or people with a disability attest how others, even close friends, distance themselves. It is as if identifying with them reminds us of our own vulnerability, and would cut through the denial of, “This won’t happen to me.” Actively trying to remember a time of our own –personal or collective–victimization is a means of opening our heart and creating the possibility of loving the stranger. Love comes with responsibilities or an action component, if it is to have any meaning. At the very least it means to treat someone fairly (some commentators have narrowly interpreted love the stranger as meaning applying the same laws); other aspects of the tradition indicates that it is to insure that the basic needs of the other are met. Seeing someone as other is the first step towards dehumanization (dehumanizing both oneself and the other), it begins a process of justifying depriving the other of basic human dignity or needs. We need to remember our common humanity to help us live up to our responsibilities in both our day-to-day encounter with others and in our role as citizens in a political system that has taken dehumanization to the extreme form of using and justifying torture of “the other.”

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