



JEWISH FUNDS
FOR JUSTICE

combining The Shefa Fund
and Jewish Fund for Justice

Why do we care about immigration? Prepared by Rabbi Jill Jacobs, Jewish Funds for Justice

I Defining the *ger*

1) Leviticus 19:33-34

(לג) וכי יגור אתך גר בארצכם לא תונו אותו: (לד) כאזרח מכם יהיה לכם הגר הגר אתכם ואהבת לו כמוך כי גרים הייתם בארץ מצרים אני יקוק אלהיכם:

When a *ger* dwells with you in your land, do not oppress him. The *ger* who dwells with you should be like one of your citizens; love him like yourself, for you were *gerim* in the land of Egypt. I am Adonai your God.

2) Jacob Milgrom "Reflections on the Biblical GER" *Leviticus 17-22* (Anchor Bible, 2000)

The *ger*. . . is a resident alien; he has uprooted himself (or has been uprooted) from his homeland and has taken permanent residence in the land of Israel. . . Having severed his ties with his original home, he has no family to turn to for support. Thus deprived of both land and family, he was generally poor, listed together with the Levite, the fatherless, and the widow among the wards of society (Deut. 26:12), and exposed to exploitation and oppression. (Ezek. 22:7). . .

3) Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael *Mishpatim, Masekhet Nezikin 18*

וגר לא תונה ולא תלחצנו כי גרים הייתם בארץ מצרים. לא תונו, בדברים, ולא תלחצנו, בממון, שלא תאמר. . . תלמוד לומר כי גרים הייתם, מכאן היה רבי נתן אומר מום שבך אל תאמר לחבירך

"You shall not wrong or oppress the *ger*, for you were *gerim* in the land of Egypt."
"You shall not wrong" with words, "and you shall not oppress" financially " . . . the Torah says "For you were *gerim*." Based on this, Rabbi Natan said, "you should not point out in others a flaw that is also in you."

4) Mekhilta d'Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai 12

(Note that in rabbinic text, beginning around the third century CE, the word "*ger*" comes to mean "convert to Judaism." Before this period, there had been no term for "convert," as the concept of conversion per se did not yet exist.)

(מט) תורה אחת יהיה לאזרח מה אזרח שקיבל עליו כל דברי תורה אף הגר שקיבל עליו כל דברי תורה מיכאן אמרו גר שקיבל עליו כל דברי תורה חוץ מדבר אחד אין מקבלין . . .

"There shall be one law for the citizen and for the *ger* who dwells among you" (Exodus 12:49) Just as the citizen accepts upon him/herself all of the words of the Torah, so too, the *ger* accepts upon him/herself all of the words of the Torah. From this, we learn that a *ger* who accepts the entire Torah, with the exception of one law, should not be accepted [into the Jewish people].

Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael and *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* are two collections of halakhic (legal) midrashim (rabbinic commentaries) on the book of Exodus, compiled, respectively, around the third century and the fourth or fifth century CE.

II The immigrant experience

1) Letter from a foreign Jew living in Egypt in the eleventh century (in Mark Cohen, *Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt*)

I have no cover, and no couch, and no work to which I can resort. I am from a faraway place, namely Raḥba (in Iraq). I have been here three months and none of our coreligionists has paid attention to me or fed me with a piece of bread. So I have turned to God the exalted and to my master to do for me what is appropriate for every wayfarer and give me as charity a little money to raise [my] spirits, for I am miserable and dying from hunger. Dogs get their fill these days with bread, but not I.

2) "The Wandering Jew" : Illustration by Edmund J. Sullivan; text from *Sartor Resartus* by Thomas Carlyle (1898)

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he had never delivered any Course; perhaps never been incited thereto by any public furtherance or requisition.



To all appearance, the enlightened Government of Weissnichtwo, in founding their New University, imagined they had done enough, if 'in times like

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Text illustrated: "He was a stranger there, wafted thither by what is called the course of circumstances; concerning whose parentage, birth-place, prospects, or pursuits, Curiosity had indeed made inquiries, but satisfied herself with the most indistinct replies. For himself, he was a man so still and altogether unparticipating, that to question him even afar off on such particulars was a thing of more than usual delicacy: besides, in his sly way, he had ever some quaint turn, not without its satirical edge, wherewith to divert such intrusions, and dettr you from the like. Wits spoke of him secretly as if he were a kind of Melchizedek, without father or mother of any kind; sometimes, with reference to his great historic and statistic knowledge, and the vivid way he had of expressing himself like an eye-witness of distant transactions and scenes, they called him the **Ewige Jude**, Everlasting, or as we say, Wandering Jew" (19-20).

3) Anzia Yeziarska, "How I found America" in *Hungry Hearts* (New York: Penguin, 1996) 209-212 (first published in 1920)

Steerage—dirty bundles—foul odors—seasick humanity—but I saw and heard nothing of the foulness and ugliness around me. I floated in showers of sunshine; visions upon visions of the new world opened before me.

From lips to lips flowed the golden legend of the golden country:

"In America you can say what you feel—you can voice your thoughts in the open streets without fear of a Cossack."

"In America is a home for everybody. The land is your land. Not like in Russia where you feel yourself a stranger in the village where you were born and raised—the village in which your father and grandfather lie buried."

"Everybody is with everybody alike, in America. Christians and Jews are brothers together."

An end to the worry for bread. An end to the fear of the bosses over you. Everybody can do what he wants with his life in America.”

“There are no high or low in America. Even the President holds hands with Gedalyeh Mindel.” . . .

“Land! Land!” came the joyous shout. . .

All crowded and pushed on deck. They strained and stretched to get the first glimpse of the “golden country,” lifting their children on their shoulders that they might see beyond them. . .

Age-old visions sang themselves in me—songs of freedom of an oppressed people.

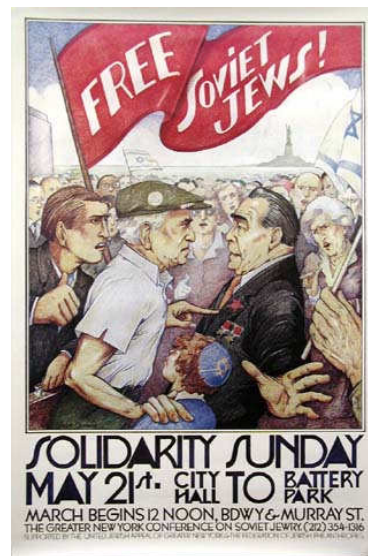
America!—America!

Between buildings that loomed like mountains, we struggled with our bundles, spreading around us the smell of the steerage. Up Broadway, under the bridge and through the swarming streets of the ghetto, we followed Gedalyeh Mindel.

I looked about the narrow streets of squeezed-in stores and houses, ragged clothes, dirty bedding oozing out of the windows, ash-cans and garbage-cans cluttering the side-walks. A vague sadness pressed down my heart—the first doubt of America.

“Where are the green fields and open spaces in America?” cried my heart. “Where is the golden country of my dreams?”

4) From the Soviet Jewry Movement (1970s & 80s)



How do each of these texts/pictures define and/or describe the immigrant experience and/or the notion of immigrants and immigration?

With which of these texts/pictures do you most identify? Why?

Which of these texts/pictures best describes your commitment to immigration work?