Love the Ger: A Biblical Perspective

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Throughout the first 35 issues of *Conversations*, we have presented a considerable number of articles on the subject of conversion to Judaism in modern times. The general thrust of these articles is that there are strong halakhic positions that advocate greater latitude for the acceptance of converts than the restrictive positions often conveyed in the contemporary Orthodox world. There also are many commandments to love converts and to make them feel absolutely welcome as permanent members of the Jewish community.

These viewpoints are vital for addressing a plethora of halakhic and social issues pertaining to conversion and converts, and it is imperative for the rabbinic world and the broader community to weigh these positions when making decisions. This issue has been a central concern of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals since its founding in 2007.[1]

In this article, we will step back into the biblical world, and explore the Torah's attitude toward the *ger*. Before proceeding, we must understand that in the Oral Law, there are two categories of *gerim*: What we call a convert today is the *ger tzedek*, righteous convert, who becomes a permanent member of the Jewish people. There also is a category of *ger toshav*, resident alien. These are non-Jewish individuals who live in Israel

and adopt certain standards of belief and practice (to be discussed below), but do not become Jewish through a formal process of conversion.

The plain sense of the Torah does not have these two categories. Rather, a *ger* always is a resident alien and refers to non-Israelites who permanently live in Israel. The biblical term *ger* more broadly refers to people living in a land that is not theirs (see Rashi on Exodus 22:20). God tells Abraham that his descendants will be *gerim* in a land that is not theirs (Genesis 15:13).[2] Abraham refers to himself as a *ger ve-toshav* to the Hittites when he attempts to purchase a burial site for Sarah (Genesis 23:4).[3] Israelites even have the status of *gerim ve-toshavim* in their own land, since the land belongs to God (Leviticus 25:23).[4] When the Israelites lived in Egypt, the idea that they were *gerim* has nothing to do with converting to Egyptian religion.[5] The same conversely applies to *gerim* living in Israel—they do not adopt Israelite religion, but live permanently in the land.

When the Written Law differs from the Oral Law, we apply the Oral Law in practice, but the Written Law still teaches central values of the Torah. This essay focuses on these values.

The *Ger* in the Torah

The Torah assumes that most *gerim* require the support of the community, and regularly lists them among the vulnerable members of society.[6] *Gerim* were not landowners (women like Ruth had an easier time integrating into Israelite society, since they could marry Israelite landowners), and often had no family network nearby for support.[7] The Torah exhorts Israel to care for *gerim* and to love them. God loves them, and Israel should love them and have compassion on them since the Israelites were *gerim* themselves in Egypt:

When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers (*gerim*) in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God. (Leviticus 19:33–34)

> For 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, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers (*gerim*) in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:17–19)

> The Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 59b) counts 36 references to treating the *ger* fairly, making it one of the most frequently reiterated commandments of the Torah.[8]

Civil law treats Israelites and *gerim* equally (Leviticus 24:22).[9] Strikingly, the Torah also obligates the *ger* to observe many ritual commandments. For example:

- *Gerim* may not eat leaven (*hametz*) on Passover (Exodus 12:19).
- *Gerim* may not do work on Shabbat (Exodus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:13; cf. Exodus 23:12).
- *Gerim* may not do work on Yom Kippur (Leviticus 16:29).
- *Gerim* may not eat blood (Leviticus 17:10–13).
- *Gerim* must refrain from all prohibited sexual relationships and Molekh worship (Leviticus 18:26).
- *Gerim* must attend the public Torah reading (*hakhel*) every seven years (Deuteronomy 31:12). This law is similar to the acceptance of the covenant in Deuteronomy 29:10, which includes the *ger*.
- *Gerim* may bring sacrifices in the Tabernacle (Numbers 15:14–16).
- *Gerim* incur the severe punishment of *karet* (excision) if they commit severe intentional sins (Numbers 15:29–31).

> There are exceptions which exempt *gerim* from certain laws binding on Israelites:

- *Gerim* may eat carrion (*nevelah*) (Deuteronomy 14:21).
- *Gerim* may become permanent slaves, unlike Israelites, who must go free at the Jubilee year (Leviticus 25:45–46).

The laws of the Passover sacrifice similarly suggest differences between Israelites and *gerim*:

> If a stranger who dwells with you would offer the Passover to the Lord, all his males must be circumcised; then he shall be admitted to offer it; he shall then be as a citizen of the country. But no uncircumcised person may eat of it. There shall be one law for the citizen and for the stranger who dwells among you. (Exodus 12:48–49)

Ibn Ezra explains that *gerim* are not required to bring the Passover sacrifice. However, those who wish to may do so, if they first circumcise their males.[10] This law also implies that *gerim* are not required to be circumcised unless they choose to participate in the Passover sacrifice.[11]

The commandment to dwell in booths on Sukkot applies to Israelite citizens (*ezrah*) without reference to the *ger*:

> You shall live in booths seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I the Lord your God. (Leviticus 23:42–43)

Rashbam explains that Israelite citizens must remember their humble origins as a nation in the desert so they do not become arrogant with their homes and wealth in Israel. This reasoning does not apply to *gerim*.[12]

The Oral Law

The Oral Law redefines the meaning of *ger* in the Torah by applying the two concepts of *ger tzedek* and *ger toshav*. Any equations of *ezrah* and *ger* in the Torah are understood in the Oral Law as referring exclusively to the *ger tzedek*. Therefore, a *ger toshav* is not obligated to observe the Torah's commandments directed at the *ger*.

The commandment to love *gerim* likewise is understood in the Oral Law as referring exclusively to the *ger tzedek*, and not to the *ger toshav*. The gap between the *peshat* of the Torah and the Oral Law is particularly conspicuous in Leviticus, where we find separate commandments to love one's neighbor and *gerim*:

> You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 19:18)

> The 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. (Leviticus 19:34)

The plain sense of the text appears to refer to two groups of people. "Neighbor" likely refers to fellow Israelites (*Sifra Kedoshim* 8:4, Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer 16),[13] whereas the "stranger" likely refers to the *ger toshav*, resident alien. However, the Oral Law understands the law of loving the stranger to refer to the righteous convert, the *ger tzedek*. Wouldn't that commandment already be included under the commandment to love one's neighbor? Rambam (*Hilkhot De'ot* 6:4) explains that there is a double-commandment to love converts. We must love them as we love any fellow Jew, and we also have an additional commandment to love converts.

To summarize: There are two fundamental discrepancies between the *peshat* understanding of the Torah's use of *ger* (which always refers to the *ger toshav*) and the Oral Law (which almost always understands the *ger* in the Torah as a *ger tzedek*): (1) Proper treatment: We must love, care for, and not oppress the *ger*. All of these commandments refer exclusively to the righteous convert and not the resident alien. (2) The *ger* obligated to observe commandments like Israelite citizens is the righteous convert, and not the resident alien.

There is one verse that the Oral Law must interpret as referring to *ger toshav*:

> You shall not eat anything that has died a natural death; give it to the stranger in your community to eat, or you may sell it to a foreigner. For you are a people consecrated to the Lord your God. You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk. (Deuteronomy 14:21)

Since Israelites are prohibited from eating carrion (*nevelah*), righteous converts obviously are prohibited, as well. Therefore, this *ger* must be a *ger toshav*.[14]

By interpreting most Torah references to *gerim* as referring to the *ger tzedek*, there is little left for the Oral Law to define the Torah's requirements of a *ger toshav*. They are permitted to eat carrion, but what obligations or restrictions do they have?

A talmudic debate supplies a range of views, from minimalist to maximalist (*Avodah Zarah* 64b). Some suggest that if carrion is permitted, most other Torah laws likewise are not applicable to the *ger toshav*. One Sage rules that the *ger toshav* must refrain from idolatry. Others maintain that they must observe the Seven Noahide Laws, making them ethical monotheists.[15] Leviticus 18:28 supports this position, stating that the Canaanites forfeited their right to live in the Land of Israel because of their sexual immorality and Molekh worship, which includes child sacrifice (=idolatry and murder): "So let not the land spew you out for defiling it, as it spewed out the nation that came before you."[16]

A third view in the Talmud suggests that the *ger toshav* is permitted carrion, but is obligated by all other laws of the Torah. This view is much closer to the *peshat* of the Torah, which indeed applies many laws equally to Israelite citizens and the *ger*, i.e., the *ger toshav*.

Explaining the Gap between the Written and Oral Law

In his analysis of this topic, Rabbi Yehuda Rock[17] observes that there are two competing values within the Torah for the one category of *ger toshav*: (1) There is a goal of the unification of everyone living in the land of Israel under God and the Torah, so there is one equal law for everyone. (2) Israel is a holy nation and has a unique relationship with God. The permission for a *ger* to eat carrion in

Deuteronomy 14:21 is stated in the context of Israel's special holiness, "for you are a people consecrated to the Lord your God."

We may add to Rabbi Rock's analysis by reviewing the other explicit distinctions between the Israelite citizen and the *ger* in the Torah. In Ibn Ezra's reading of Exodus 12:48 cited above, *gerim* are not obligated in the Passover Sacrifice (nor in circumcision), but those who wish to participate must circumcise their males. Both of these commandments are unique covenantal laws that govern the God-Israel relationship and therefore do not pertain to the *ger*.

The same applies to the reason Israelites cannot have permanent slavery (Leviticus 25:45–46). Through their singular covenantal relationship with God, they are God's servants and cannot be slaves of humans forever.

Finally, the Torah singles out an obligation for Israelites to dwell in booths on Sukkot (Leviticus 23:42–43), since they alone have the historical narrative of the sojourn in the wilderness.

To summarize: In general, all who live in Israel must observe the laws of the land, be cared for and loved, and receive equal treatment. In covenantal laws that highlight the unique God-Israel relationship, the *ger* is exempt and distinguished from Israelite citizens.

The Oral Law distinguishes between the *ger tzedek* who is bound by *all* of the Torah's laws and is loved and cared for by Israelites, and the *ger toshav* who must accept certain minimal standards to live in Israel. Since the Oral Law understands the commandments to love the *ger* as referring exclusively to the *ger tzedek*, it concludes that regarding the *ger toshav*, "you are obligated to sustain him" (*Pesahim* 21b).[18]

Conclusion

The Oral Law teaches that a core Jewish value is to love converts to Judaism. The Written Law teaches that same love and inclusion of the resident alien, complete with rights and responsibilities. The Torah teaches a remarkable love, sensitivity, and fair treatment of all people living in the Land of Israel.

The Torah commands the *ger* to participate in the *hakhel* ceremony every seven years, to participate in the acceptance of the Torah (Deuteronomy 31:12). In this spirit, Joshua executes a public Torah acceptance after crossing into the Land of Israel, and there are *gerim* present:

> All Israel—stranger and citizen alike—with their elders, officials, and magistrates, stood on either side of the Ark.... There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded that Joshua failed to read in the presence of the entire assembly of Israel, including the women and children and the strangers who accompanied them (Joshua 8:33–35).

That God-fearing non-Israelites may serve God in the Temple traces its roots to Numbers 15:14–16:

> And when, throughout the ages, a stranger who has taken up residence with you, or one who lives among you, would present an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord—as you do, so shall it be done by the rest of the congregation. There shall be one law for you and for the resident stranger; it shall be a law for all time throughout the ages. You and the stranger shall be alike before the Lord; the same ritual and the same rule shall apply to you and to the stranger who resides among you.

King Solomon proclaimed this welcome message at the dedication of the First Temple:

> Or if a foreigner who is not of Your people Israel comes from a distant land for the sake of Your name—for they shall hear about Your great name and Your mighty hand and Your outstretched arm—when he comes to pray toward this House, oh, hear in Your heavenly abode and grant all that the foreigner asks You for. Thus all the peoples of the earth will know Your name and revere You, as does Your people

> Israel; and they will recognize that Your name is attached to this House that I have built. (I Kings 8:41–43)

This ideal carries over into the exalted messianic visions in the Book of Isaiah:

> In the days to come, the Mount of the Lord's House shall stand firm above the mountains and tower above the hills; and all the nations shall gaze on it with joy. And the many peoples shall go and say: "Come, let us go up to the Mount of the Lord, to the House of the God of Jacob; that He may instruct us in His ways, and that we may walk in His paths." For instruction shall come forth from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. (Isaiah 2:2–3)

> As for the foreigners who attach themselves to the Lord, to minister to Him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be His servants—all who keep the Sabbath and do not profane it, and who hold fast to My covenant—I will bring them to My sacred mount and let them rejoice in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices shall be welcome on My altar; for My House shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. (Isaiah 56:6–7)

In a novel extension of these values, Ezekiel prophesies that in the ideal future, *gerim* even will own land in Israel:

> You shall allot it as a heritage for yourselves and for the strangers who reside among you, who have begotten children among you. You shall treat them as Israelite citizens; they shall receive allotments along with you among the tribes of Israel. You shall give the stranger an allotment within the tribe where he resides—declares the Lord God (Ezekiel 47:22–23).

One cannot envision greater integration of the *ger* than this.[19]

Notes

[1] For a summary of the relevant issues, as well as references to many of the articles in previous issues of *Conversations*, see Hayyim Angel, "Conversion: Halakha and Public Policy, Primary Sources," and "Conversion: Halakha and Public Policy, Contemporary Applications," *Conversations* 32 (New York: Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2018), pp. 28–40, 41–51. See also the YouTube video of the Institute's symposium on conversion in October, 2018, which featured Rabbi Marc Angel, Rabbi Hayyim Angel, and Rabbi Yona Reiss, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GG17aaahdPQ&t=16s.
[2] This term is used regularly throughout the Torah in reference to Israel's sojourn in Egypt. See Exodus 22:20; 23:9; Leviticus 19:33–34; Deuteronomy 10:19; 23:8; 24:17–22.
[3] See also Exodus 2:22, referring to Zipporah's birth of Moses' son Gershom: "She bore a son whom he named Gershom, for he said, 'I have been a stranger in a foreign land.'" Cf. Exodus 18:3.
[4] See also Psalm 39:13; I Chronicles 29:15.
[5] A different term, *nokhri*, tends to refer to non-Israelites who come to Israel on a temporary basis, such as merchants.
[6] See, for example, Leviticus 19:10; 23:22; 25:6; Deuteronomy 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:17; 26:11; 27:19.
[7] The Torah acknowledges the possibility that some *gerim* will become wealthy (Leviticus 25:47), and it is a curse if Israelites sin and decline while the *ger* rises (Deuteronomy 28:43).
[8] Nehama Leibowitz went so far as to suggest that the *reason* God wanted the Israelites to be enslaved in Egypt was so that they would develop a sensitivity toward the underprivileged (*New Studies in Shemot: Exodus*, pp. 1–11).
[9] See also Numbers 35:15; Deuteronomy 24:17; 27:19.
[10]They also must be in a state of ritual purity like any Israelite (see Numbers 9:6–7, 13–14).
[11] The Oral Law interprets this passage as referring to the *ger tzedek*, the righteous convert. It therefore understands the verse as requiring the *ger* to bring the Passover Sacrifice (Rambam, *Hilkhot Korban Pesah* 9:7).
[12] Jacob Milgrom (*Anchor Bible: Leviticus 17–22* [New York: Doubleday, 2000], pp. 1496–1499) maintains that the *ger* must refrain from prohibitions since violation of negative commandments pollutes the land, whereas the *ger* is exempt from positive commandments. Milgrom explains the anomalous permission for the *ger* to eat carrion in Deuteronomy 14:21 as a means of preserving some distinction between Israelites and *gerim*. This explanation, however, is unconvincing, given the Torah's equation of Israelites and *gerim* in every other arena.
[13] For a survey of Jewish views through the ages, with emphasis on a sea change in interpretation toward viewing "Love your neighbor" as a reference to all humanity in more recent times, see Reinhard Neudecker ("'And You Shall Love Your Neighbor as Yourself—I Am the Lord' (Lev 19,18) in Jewish Interpretation," *Biblica* 73 (1992), pp. 496–517. See also the illuminating moral debate between Ernst Simon, "The Neighbor (*Re'a*) Whom We Shall Love," and the response of Harold Fisch, in *Modern Jewish Ethics: Theory and Practice*, ed. Marvin Fox (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1975), pp. 29–61.
[14] The Septuagint reflects the same distinction. Jacob Milgrom notes, "[T]he Septuagint [invented] a new word, *proselutos* 'proselyte,' for the convert, a term they consistently use for *ger* in all legal contexts. The sole exception is Exod 12:19, where they use the transliterated (Aramaic) form *geioras*, and Deut 14:21, where, in order to prevent concluding that the convert may eat of a *nebela*, they translate *ger* as *paroikos* 'alien' (*Anchor Bible: Leviticus 17–22*, p. 1501).

[15] Rambam (*Hilkhot Issurei Bi'ah* 14:7–8) rules that the *ger toshav* must renounce idolatry and commit to observe the Seven Noahide Laws. Rambam rules further that the laws of *ger toshav* are inapplicable today, since halakhah links those laws to the laws of the Jubilee Year. Rabbi Saul Zucker (unpublished essay, emailed to author May 5, 2020) explains that the *ger toshav* accepts a connection to Israel as a nation, in contrast to the *ger tzedek* who accepts a connection to Israel's religion. Therefore, a halakhic *ger toshav* does not exist at a time when Israel is insufficiently constituted in its land to observe the Jubilee year. I am grateful to Rabbi Zucker for sharing his piece with me.
[16] See also Deuteronomy 12:31; 18:9–12.
[17]Yehuda Rock, "Love for the *Ger*," at https://www.etzion.org.il/en/love-ger. Accessed April 24, 2020.
[18] Yehuda Rock analyzes that talmudic law. Here are his words (see reference in previous note), with minor modifications: "The substance of this requirement is a matter of debate among the Rishonim (medieval rabbinic authorities). According to Ramban (*Gloss* to *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, Positive 16; *Commentary*, Leviticus 25:35), it refers to saving his life… Rambam views this requirement as the provision of support – i.e., communal responsibility that facilitates the conduct of life, including also basic manners and acts of kindness (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 10:12). The Gemara does not state explicitly the source for this command "to sustain him," but the Rishonim (Rashi, ad loc; Rambam, *Hilkhot Zekhiyya* 3:11; Ramban, *ibid*.) point to Leviticus 25:35: "If your brother grows poor, and his means fail with you, you shall support him—a stranger (*ger*) or a resident (*toshav*)—that he may survive with you." The structure of this verse is somewhat opaque, but the message seems to be that the command to support and sustain a brother extends to include a "*ger* or *toshav*." The Sages explain (*Torat Kohanim*, ad loc), "'*Ger*'—this means a *ger tzedek*; '*toshav*'—this means a *ger* who eats carcasses." In other words, the *ger* mentioned in the verse is a convert, as the word is usually used by the Sages; the *toshav* mentioned in the verse is actually a *ger toshav*. This, then, is the source of the requirement to support and sustain even a *ger toshav*.
[19] *Sifri Beha'alotekha* 78 reinterprets Ezekiel to refer to atonement rather than land inheritance. Several classical commentators interpret the passage as referring to the *ger tzedek* who will inherit land (see, e.g., Rashi, Radak, Abarbanel, Malbim).