

PASSOVER LEARNING

Knowing the Soul of the Stranger



This resource is designed to guide your exploration of Jewish teachings on memory, obligation, and the ethical call to care for the stranger. Through the texts and reflections provided, you'll delve into the enduring question of what we owe those who dwell among us – and how ancient wisdom speaks to the challenges communities face today. Use this guide to spark thoughtful discussion, deepen your understanding of collective responsibility, and renew your commitment to building a society rooted in dignity and belonging.

Framing

At this point in the book of Exodus, the Israelites are mere months into their journey in the wilderness. They've just received the commandments at Mount Sinai, where they are currently camped. Though they have experienced liberation and revelation, they won't enter the land that will become their home for another forty years. As they learn how to build a just society, they are reminded of the following over and over again. The term *ger* denotes a foreigner living among residents of a given area.

EXODUS 22:20

You shall not wrong a ger or oppress them, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

EXODUS 23:9

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

Discussion Questions

- 1 How does how we remember affect our ethical behavior?
- 2 What is the difference between avoiding harm and creating belonging?
- 3 How might past experiences of vulnerability shape how a society treats others? Are there limits to that influence?

Two Kinds of Moral Motivation

Nechama Leibowitz (Iyunim, Shemot, pp. 383–385)

Memory of one's own humiliation is no guarantee that one will not oppress the sojourner when one has gained independence. For this reason, we have the double motivation in the verses. Some will be sufficiently moved by the memory of their experiences of oppression at the hands of others, as they know the soul of the sojourner. On the other hand, those not prompted by their own experiences of similar suffering to act kindly towards the sojourner in their midst will at least be influenced by the argument of the victim of their oppression.

Discussion Questions

- 1 Why might formerly marginalized people fail to protect others later? Does security change moral priorities?
- 2 Are compassion and communal self-protection ever in tension? How do societies navigate that?

The Context You're Working In

Immigration has been a cornerstone of American history, with people arriving from across the world in pursuit of economic opportunity, religious freedom, and a better life, a journey that continues today. Immigrants have made profound contributions to the arts, sciences, business, and the broader cultural fabric of the United States, enriching the nation's diversity and spirit of innovation.¹ At the same time, many immigrant families navigate significant systemic challenges, including limited access to affordable healthcare (with roughly 80% of U.S. counties lacking adequate healthcare centers), mental health barriers such as cultural isolation and a shortage of multilingual providers, and obstacles in education and the workforce, such as language barriers and under-recognition of professional skills, that can contribute to long-term economic hardship.²

Values Tension: Responsibility to Ourselves and Others

Responsibility to ourselves means living freely, without burdens that erode our well-being or agency. This isn't selfishness—it's recognizing that sustaining our own balance and integrity enables us to contribute more fully to others' flourishing. Responsibility to others calls us to extend that same care: to help lift burdens, protect dignity, and share in struggle. These aren't opposing duties but partners, asking us to discern how to hold them together.

Closing Questions

- 1 How should a society balance compassion with stability? Is there a limit to communal responsibility?
- 2 How does this tension manifest for you? How might it shift depending on the context of what's happening around you?
- 3 In what way does service push us to respond to that tension?

1 <https://immigrationinitiative.harvard.edu/americas-long-fractured-history-of-immigration/>

2 <https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/concern/projects/m039kd78g>

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Discussions Questions

- 1 How should a society balance compassion with stability? Is there a limit to communal responsibility?
- 2 What happens when values we hold dearly pull us in opposite directions?

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