

Why We Translate “Ger” As “Immigrant”

The Talmud reminds us that the Torah “warns against the wronging of a *ger* in 36 places; others say, in 46 places” (Bava Metzia 59b¹). *Ger* can be understood in a range of ways; Bible scholar Christiana Van Houten² suggests that “immigrant” is the most accurate translation. Here’s some of her reasoning:

1. Van Houten cites Bible scholar Frank Spina, who identifies three word-roots related to *ger* in biblical Hebrew: **to sojourn, to stir up strife, and to be afraid**. Spina suggests “immigrant” best captures this full range of meaning—of someone who both arrives in a country afraid and who may make those who already live there fearful. (Van Houten, page 19)
2. Citizenship and nativeness are culturally-defined terms whose definitions can shift. Bible scholars disagree about who the *ezrach* (“native-born” in biblical Hebrew, as in Leviticus 24:22, “You shall have one law for the *ger* and the *ezrach*...”) was. Van Houten joins the group who believe, somewhat ironically, that *ezrachim* were the Judeans who returned from Babylonian exile to Israel—a term they used to distinguish themselves from those who remained in the land! (152) The fluidity of this term reminds us that we, too, can transform our ideas about who counts as “one of us.”

“Prayer for Immigrant Children and Families [excerpts]

We are here to say yes...
to the vital moral fabric of our lives.

To those who would tear that fabric apart,
We are here to say—we will always show up to stitch it back together.
We walk in the footsteps of our ancestor Abraham
Who “stitched worlds together”
Who saw connection everywhere
Who was commanded to be a blessing to all the families of the earth.
We know that it is so much easier—and faster—to tear things apart
Than it is to stitch them together.
But we will keep showing up for as long as it takes.

Because we are parents ourselves
Because we are teachers
Because we are witnesses
Because we are weavers
Because we are threads
in the tapestry of Your creation.

— **RABBI SHARON COHEN ANISFELD**, PRESIDENT, HEBREW COLLEGE, NEWTON, MASS., ON A DELEGATION TO THE TEXAS BORDER ORGANIZED BY THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS; JUNE, 2018.

- 1 It likely comes as no accident that this statement immediately follows the famous story of the oven of *akhenai* and the ostracism of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, who himself becomes a sort of *ger* in his own community.
- 2 *Alien in Israelite Law: A Study of the Changing Legal Status of Strangers in Ancient Israel*, The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, 1991.

3. How the Torah views the *ger* evolved through three historical stages³:
- In the earliest stage (the “Covenant Code” of *Parshat Mishpatim*⁴), the focus was on offering **hospitality** to individual *gerim* who came to live among the Israelites. The Torah establishes some basic rights for *gerim*, but that framework of hospitality makes the *ger* a guest in someone else’s home.
 - In the next stage (Deuteronomy⁵), caring for the *ger*—along with the widow and orphan—becomes a societal priority. Van Houten writes, “Rather than preeminently requiring hospitality, these laws would seem to be creating a system of support which would allow those on the fringes to be economically self-sufficient.” (161)
 - In the final stage (the Priestly texts⁶, edited and compiled around the time of the Babylonian exile and return to Israel), “for the first time, the possibility will exist of an **outsider achieving insider status**” (118). These texts introduce circumcision as a route to joining the people and being able to offer the Passover sacrifice, a key ritual of belonging. (Exodus 12:48-49)⁷

The Torah therefore offers three models of how we might respond to immigrants today:

- With hospitality, allowing select ones to live in “our” country;
- With a structured system for supporting their basic needs, just as we care for our own poor, while maintaining the distinction;
- With a full option for acquiring citizenship.

The first and the second model may protect non-natives from exploitation. The third model allows for full integration—and for the *ger* to become an *ezrach*.



TALMUD SHABBAT 127A

Rav Yehuda bar Sheila said that Rabbi Asi said that Rabbi Yoḥanan said: There are six deeds which yield immediate fruit and continue to yield fruit in the world-to-come: **Hospitality toward guests**, and visiting the sick, and consideration during prayer, and rising early to the study hall, and raising children to engage in Torah study, and judging another favorably.

3 This follows the widely accepted Documentary Hypothesis of how the Torah’s text came together over time.

4 This section includes four references to protecting the *ger*: Exodus 22:20, 23:9, 23:12, and 20:8-11.

5 Deuteronomy includes 18 references to protecting the *ger*: 1:16; 5:14; 10:18-19; 14:21,29; 16:11,14; 24:14,17,19-21; 26:11-13; 27:19; 29:11; 31:12.

6 Van Houten identifies 34 references to protecting the *ger* in this body of text: Ex. 12:19,48-49; Lev. 16:29; 17:8,10,12,13,15; 18:26; 19:10,33-34; 20:2; 22:18; 23:22; 24:16,22; 25:23,35,47; Num. 9:14; 15:14-16,26,29,30; 19:10; 35:15.

7 See also the ritual of the red heifer, Numbers 19:10.