

5 ways we meet the 'stranger'

In biblical times, the Hebrew term *ger*, 'stranger,' referred to a foreign-born permanent resident. Unable to fall back on the ties of local family/clan, the stranger could easily fall victim to discrimination. Discuss some of the ways we meet the 'stranger: the person of another land, culture, religion, gender, sexual orientation. Consider, too, the hidden, subtle and surprising ways we experience marginalization 'close to home.' For example:



1. "We're the outlaws," said my sister-in-law jokingly as she sat with two other in-laws at a family gathering. But was it just a joke? Was she touching a nerve in our apparently big happy family?



2. "I am a shy person, and I stutter. Most of the time it is okay, but sometimes at a social function I find myself among a group of extroverted people, all vying for the limelight and I feel insignificant, like I don't belong."



3. "The new secretary in the office doesn't quite know the ropes and drives me crazy, forever asking me questions about where to find this and that. But it must be even harder for her being the 'new kid on the block.'"



4. "Once inside the church I didn't know what to do, so I just followed everyone else. At one point we were on our knees and I wondered why. I was nervous, afraid that my religious ignorance was on public display."



5. "Years of living in Australia have been rewarding, but come Christmas, I feel so homesick. I wish my daughter could experience the joyous way we celebrate Christmas in the Philippines. All I can give her are my stories."

This *Light of Torah* leaflet series for Catholic parishes encourages parishioners to be attentive to the gift of Torah as part of their sacred Scriptures, and to the gift of Judaism which gave us Jesus, the Living Torah. Text by Teresa Pirola. Illustrations by Francine Pirola. © The Story Source, 2010. Reproduction permitted for non-commercial church use. Further reading: www.lightoftorah.net; www.batkol.info and www.etz-hayim.com.



Light of Torah

Ancient texts
through fresh eyes,
alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

"We recognized that dialogue is not easy, even among those of us who supposedly have a lot of experience in it. For instance, one participant noted that after one of our sessions, although individuals were invited to ask questions, most in fact made statements instead. This shows that even asking questions does not come naturally. And dialogue, like questioning, is a skill."

Thomas Casey SJ, Director,
Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies, Rome.

Although this quotation refers to a situation of Jewish-Christian dialogue, we could also apply it to our approach to the bible. How often do we treat the bible as a book of statements, rather than an invitation to explore the text with our heartfelt questions. Yet, the Word of God is not a divine monologue, it is a loving invitation to conversation. Through the Scriptures God 'speaks' to us, and we, too, speak to God, engaging with the text bringing our stories, complexities, joys, heartbreaks and, yes, our deepest questions.

Traditional Jewish approaches to the bible have a lively and skilled way of questioning the text, of entering into spirited debate over the various interpretations that emerge, of engaging one's prayerful imagination. *Light of Torah* introduces Catholics to this approach through a weekly reflection on the Torah, the first five books of the bible.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Exodus 21:1—24:18

This week's Torah portion continues the narrative of the Mt. Sinai Covenant. A further code of conduct is introduced in the form of a list of judicial rulings. The list twice makes mention of the obligation to treat the 'stranger' justly. The sages of Israel were sensitive to this, noting that it is most frequently quoted of all the commandments in the Torah, mentioned no less than 36 times, even more often than the commandment to love God. Let's look at this ancient rule about the treatment of strangers in Ex.22:20; 23:9.

1. Rashi, 288; Leibowitz, 385
2. Rashi, 300

Sources: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem, 1996); Rashi: *Commentary on Exodus*. Sapirstein ed. (Brooklyn, 1995, 1999); www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20091217_1.pdf. Scripture quotations: New JPS.

Tasting Torah

"You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Ex.22:20).

"You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt" (Ex.23:9).

Two very similar verses. Inspired by traditional Jewish approaches to Scripture, we greet the repetition in the text with a lively curiosity and a prayerful imagination. We are alert to a subtle difference between the verses. Can you see it? Yes, why does the Torah add, in the second quotation, *"for you know the feelings of the stranger"*? With Rashi and Ramban, two great medieval Torah scholars who were fascinated by this subtle variation, ponder this question as you discuss the sacred text.

Touching Torah

Echoing ancient sources, Rashi says that these two verses in the Torah reveal two different motives for treating the stranger justly. The first verse suggests a motivation guided by self-preservation: *Don't insult the stranger or you will find yourself being insulted in return!* Ramban gives another pragmatic interpretation: *You may think the stranger is defenceless, but watch out! Oppress him and you will find others coming to his defence, just as God came to your aid when you were powerless in Egypt* (1). Ramban's reasoning is particularly apt in light of Ex.22:22-33. Revisit these verses.

Depthing Torah

And what is the motive suggested by the second quotation? Rashi sums it up, *"How hard it is for him when they oppress him,"* (2) thus appealing to the historical memory of the Exodus deeply engraved upon the consciousness of every Israelite. It is the memory of the past suffering and consequent liberation of their people that will move the Israelite's heart with compassion for the stranger and ensure that the humanitarian rule is faithfully observed.

Commentators wonder what led Rashi to include the motive defined by self-interest when the altruistic, loving motive is clearly morally superior. In answer: because Rashi understands human frailty. An appeal to love and to memory is not enough to contain the aggressive inclinations of some people. Indeed, their memory of past sufferings sometimes leads them to seek compensation by the lording of power over others as soon as the opportunity arises. What do you think of Rashi's interpretation? Can you appreciate how his approach to Scripture brings to light insightful questions and issues from textual details which at first glance appear insignificant?

Doing Torah

Reflect on the place of the 'stranger' in your life's journey. (See also back page.)

What 'strangers' have you met, befriended, or perhaps avoided?

Have you ever felt like a stranger yourself?

What does this Torah portion teach you?



Faith & life

"My grandmother seemed to be forever hoarding things that other people would dispose of without a second thought: empty jars, pieces of string, old rubber bands. 'Just in case I need them one day,' she would say. Grandma had struggled to raise a family during the Great Depression. The memory of that suffering never left her."

Talking point:

Is there an historical 'exodus' memory (of hardship and liberation) in your own family? If so, what impact has this had on present-day attitudes and behavior patterns?