

For You are Strangers & Temporary Residents

Parashat Behar
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One of the most central ideas that emerges from the laws pertaining to the seven-year sabbatical cycle (Shemittah), culminating in the Jubilee year (Yovel), is given expression in Parashat Behar:

Leviticus 25:23 23 The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land belongs to Me, <u>for you are strangers and [temporary] residents with Me.</u>	ויקרא פרשת בהר פרק כה (כג) והארץ לא תמכר לצמיתת כי לי הארץ כי גרים ותושבים אתם עמדי:
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The refraint from cultivating the land during the Shemittah year and the release of ownership that occurs during the Yovel year serve to remind us that we are sojourners in God's land. This very concept was already articulated by Abraham, Judaism's founding father. Even as he purchases a permanent resting place for Sarah, Abraham recognizes that he is merely a resident alien on God's promised land:

Genesis 23 1 And the life of Sarah was one hundred years and twenty years and seven years; [these were] the years of the life of Sarah. 2 And Sarah died in Kiriath Arba, which is Hebron, in the land of Canaan, and Abraham came to eulogize Sarah and to bewail her. 3 And Abraham arose from before his dead, and he spoke to the sons of Heth, saying, 4 <u>"I am a stranger and an inhabitant with you. Give me burial property with you, so that I may bury my dead from before me."</u>	בראשית פרשת חיי שרה פרק כג (א) ויהיו חיי שרה מאה שנה ועשרים שנה ושבע שנים שני חיי שרה: (ב) ותמת שרה בקריית ארבע הוא חברון בארץ כנען ויבא אברהם לספד לשרה ולבכתה: (ג) ויקם אברהם מעל פני מתו וידבר אל בני חת לאמר: (ד) <u>גר ותושב אנכי עמכם תנו לי אחזת קבר עמכם ואקברה מתי מלפני:</u>
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Many Jewish commentators and thinkers have argued that being a *Ger* (a sojourner) is central to Jewish identity. I've included below sources that frame three possible outlooks and dispositions inherent to this idea.

A. Political & Moral

According to Sivan Rahav Meir, a well-known Israeli journalist and contemporary Torah commentator, being *Gerim* informs our relationship to the land. We are not masters of the land with inalienable rights to it. Rather, our ownership of the land is conditioned upon moral behavior and adherence to God's law.

Sivan Rahav Meir, #Parsha, p. 189 Many commentators have explained that the rules of the game are completely different in the Land of Israel. It belongs to us precisely in accordance with our behavior. Just as a safe has an entry code, so does the Land of Israel. If we want to access that code, we are expected to live up to a certain standard of behavior. Of course, it goes without saying that this is where the Jewish people belong, and we must speak up and fight against those who wish to erase our rights to the land. But the land is not automatically ours. We need to show some humility, hoping that our conduct makes us worth of having it. It might be a better idea to speak not of our rights to the land, but of our obligations to it.
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B. Cultural & Philosophical

Unlike Sivan Rahav Meir, who is living in Israel and is immersed in a dominant Jewish society within a sovereign Jewish state, Rav Soloveitchik's concerns are cultural and philosophical. For Rav Soloveitchik, *Gerim* is a disposition, a stance we must insist upon in our encounter with modernity and/or clash with the majority culture.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *A Stranger and a Resident*, Reflections of the Rav, p. 169

Abraham's definition of his dual status, we believe, describes with profound accuracy the historical position of the Jew who resides in a predominantly non-Jewish society. He was a resident, like other inhabitants of Canaan, sharing with them a concern for the welfare of society, digging wells, and contributing to the progress of the country in loyalty to its government and institutions. Here, Abraham was clearly a fellow citizen, a patriot among compatriots, joining others in advancing the common welfare. However, there was another aspect, the spiritual, in which Abraham regarded himself as a stranger. His identification and solidarity with his fellow citizens in the secular realm did not imply his readiness to relinquish any aspects of his religious uniqueness. His was a different faith and he was governed by perceptions, truths, and observances which set him apart from the larger faith community. In this regard, Abraham and his descendants would always remain "strangers."

C. Spiritual & Existential

Midrash Lekach Tov completely spiritualizes the concept of space. We are not simply *Gerim* in the land, but rather we are mortal sojourners in this world.

Midrash Lekach Tov, Vayigash

Just as a sojourner anticipates leaving a place on any day, so too the righteous contemplate the day of death daily. They are like sojourners in the land. But the wicked don't pay heed to the day of death. As it is written, "For there are no fetters [*charzuvot*] to their death" (Psalms 73:4). There are no "fetters" [*charzuvot*] means that they don't dread [*charedin*] nor do they agonize [*atzevin*] over the day of death.

מדרש לקח טוב, ויגש

כשם שהגר בכל יום מצפה לצאת מן המקום. כך הצדיקים חושבים יום המיתה. והם כגרים בארץ. אבל הרשעים אין חוששין ליום המיתה. שנא' כי אין חרצובות למותם ובריא אולם (שם עג ד). אין חרצובות אינן חרדין ועצבין מיום המיתה.

These sources demonstrate that cultivating a sense of ourselves as *Gerim* can inform our political and moral actions, guide our encounters with competing cultures and philosophies, as well as deepen our appreciation for the fragility of life. Though the past fourteen months have been challenging and unsettling for so many of us in a variety of ways, it is worth noting that there are certainly important lessons and insights that we all learned through the experience of feeling unsettled. As we begin the process of settling anew into a new normal, may the moral humility, the cultural fortitude, and spiritual insight gained during our own unsettling of the past year remain with us as well.