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No! In the Torah, a ‘ger’ is NOT a convert

Shammai Engelmayer

I do not often respond to letters criticizing a column I wrote because people are as entitled to their opinions as I am to mine. However, there is so much that is wrong with a letter in last week’s Jewish Standard—"Torah says Trump is right in his treatment of immigrants”—that a response is warranted.

The letter’s author took exception to my last column regarding how Torah law requires us to treat the “stranger in our midst.” According to its author, the Torah says nothing about how to treat strangers, whoever they are. Rather, when the Torah uses the word “ger,” it “does not mean an illegal alien or a stranger, but a convert to the Jewish religion.”

That claim originates in the talmudic era. A prominent example is the discussion of the treatment of converts in the Babylonian Talmud tractate Bava Metzia 59b, where “ger” in various Torah verses is translated as convert. We find it elsewhere, as well (see, for example, the rabbinic commentary Sifra to Leviticus 19:34), but that is a flat-out distortion of what the Torah says. Although convert is one meaning they give to ger, a majority of our sages of blessed memory translate ger in the Torah’s verses as stranger, not convert.

Translating ger as convert often leads to hilarious absurdities. In Genesis 23:4, for example, our father Abraham said to the Hittites with whom he was negotiating, “I am a ger and a resident among you.” If ger means convert, Abraham was telling them that he had converted to their religion, which is ridiculous on its face.

Leviticus 19:34 states, “The ger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him [or her] as yourself, for you were ‘gerim’ in the land of Egypt.” If ger means convert (the Sifra to Leviticus interprets it this way), what this phrase says is, “for you were converts in the land of Egypt,” meaning that Jacob and his family arrived in Egypt and converted to its religion. The absurdity becomes even more transparent in the context of the entire verse. That is because it would have God saying that we are to “love the stranger” precisely because, when we arrived in Egypt, we abandoned Him and worshipped Ra or Horus, or some other Egyptian no-god.

Such absurdities abound. If ger means convert, we would have to say that converts are not subject to the rules of kashrut, given Deuteronomy 14:21: “You shall not eat anything that has died a natural death; give it to the ger in your community to eat, or you may sell it to a foreigner,” meaning a non-Israelite who is only visiting. In BT Pesachim 21b, Rabbi Yehudah comments on this verse, saying that the Torah’s words regarding the ger “must be understood as they are written”—ger means a non-Jew living among Jews, not a convert to Judaism—and must not be redefined by others to suit their purposes. The Tosafot there also agree that ger is a non-Jewish resident.

The sages differed on exactly what is meant by a ger. A majority defined it as a non-Jew who has accepted the seven Noahide laws they inferred from the first few chapters of Genesis, but Rabbi Meir argues that a ger is simply a non-Jew who had abandoned pagan worship; he or she has not necessarily adoprted any of our practices. Then we have this discussion in BT Yevamot 48b:

[“In Exodus 23:12, it states, ‘Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor, in order that your ox and your ass may rest, and that your bondman] and the ger may be refreshed.’ Ger here refers to a ‘ger toshav’ [a non-Jewish resident who takes upon him- or herself to observe certain mitzvot, although which mitzvot is subject to dispute. An objection is raised:] You say it refers to a non-Jewish resident, but perhaps it refers to a true and faithful convert [known as a ger tzedek]? [No, comes the answer; a true and faithful convert is covered in the Shabbat commandment in Deuteronomy 5:14. There,] when it says ‘the ger within your gates,’ it means a true and faithful convert….[Here, then,] ger must refer to a non-Jewish resident [in order to obligate both the resident non-Jew and the true and faithful convert to observe Shabbat].”

The letter writer also takes exception to my saying that the Torah has any concern for treating the “illegal alien” just like everyone else.

According to Deuteronomy 23:16-17, “You shall not turn over to his master a slave who seeks refuge with you from his master. He shall live with you in any place he may choose among the settlements in your midst, wherever he pleases; you must not ill-treat him.” A discussion in BT Gittin 45b differs about whether the verse refers to an actual slave or a non-Jew who came to Israel to escape his idol-worshipping environment. Either way, this “slave” is an illegal alien who, says the Torah and not me, must “live with you in any place he may choose among the settlements in your midst,” and also may not be ill-treated in any way, such as being shoved into ill-equipped “internment camps” without nourishing food and drinkable water from faucets, not toilets.

The letter writer also takes exception to my quoting “a biblical ‘scholar’ who does not believe in the Divine origin of the Torah.”

To begin with, even the Torah quotes non-believers and allows for taking their advice when it appears sound. Jethro, for example, is “priest of Midian,” yet his son-in-law Moses immediately implements his plan for setting up Israel’s earliest judicial system. (See Exodus 18.) Then there are the words of the alien seer Balaam in last week’s Torah reading that are included in virtually every siddur at the start of the morning prayer service: “Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov”—How goodly are you tents, O Jacob.” Clearly, what non-believers have to say sometimes is worthy of heeding or repeating.

That being said, Richard Elliott Friedman is not a non-believer; he just does not accept that Moses wrote the Torah. I agree that Moses did not write what we call “the Torah,” although I do believe “the Torah of Moses” (a designation first found in Joshua) is contained therein, but that is for another discussion.

Actually, “the Torah of Moses” is short-hand for the Torah God dictated to Moses. Commenting on the opening phrase of Numbers 15:31—“Because he has despised the word of the Lord”—an anonymous group of sages insisted that “this refers to one who declares that the Torah is not from heaven,” including anyone who claims that just a single verse was uttered “by Moses himself.” (See BT Sanhedrin 99a.)

The sages said it, but they did not necessarily believe it. Regarding authorship of the Torah’s final chapter, for example, some of the sages argued that “Joshua wrote...the last eight verses.” (See BT Bava Batra 15a; a virtually identical discussion is found in BT Menachot 30a.)

Then there are the rules they established for how portions of the Torah are to be read in congregational settings. For example, Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 both contain long sections of curses. The sages declared that Leviticus 26 had to be read as a single aliyah because “Moses spoke [the curses] as God spoke them” to him, whereas Deuteronomy 28 could be broken up into two separate aliyot because “Moses spoke them on his own.” (See BT Megillah 31b.)

The bottom line: If the sages did not accept that God dictated every word to Moses, that Friedman also does not accept it is no reason to disqualify him as a legitimate source.

Finally, the letter writer accuses me “of trying to cloak his leftist politics in the Torah.”

I do not espouse “leftist politics,” I discuss Torah law. Disagree with my interpretations of Torah law, but do not deny that law.

In Leviticus 19, for example, we are told to “revere every man his mother and his father,” and to “rise up before the gray head, and honor the face of the old man.” It tells us to “leave [some of the gleanings from the harvest] for the poor and stranger,” to pay our workers on time, to not deal falsely with anyone, to not do “unrighteousness in judgment” or show favoritism to rich or poor, to “judge your neighbor in righteousness,” and to not mislead people with false information by “putting a stumbling block before the blind.” So if I discuss how our elderly should be treated, or what are our obligations to the poor or to the laborer, or about not favoring one group over another in legislation, or about a judicial system geared towards the rich, or even about a president who has told thousands of provable lies since taking office, am I talking Torah, or “leftist politics”?

That is for my readers to decide.