

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

We need to love the stranger in a time of oppression



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“Do not ill-treat a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in Egypt.” (Exodus 22:20).

In a time of increasing xenophobia and the normalization of hate talk, we need to be reminded of the religious call for not only love of neighbor but also love of the stranger.

We are familiar with the summary of the law given by Jesus when he was asked what must we do to inherit eternal life. He responded, “Love God and love your neighbor,” quoting the passage from the Hebrew Scriptures, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” (Leviticus 19:18). That same chapter also deals with how to treat the stranger: “When a stranger lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The stranger living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.” (Lev. 19:33-34)

The rabbis have counted more than 30 references to loving the stranger in their scripture. In a recent column by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi in the United Kingdom, he discusses two aspects of this command. “The first is the relative powerlessness of the stranger. He or she is not surrounded by family, friends, neighbors, a community of those ready to come to their defense.”

The second aspect is what Sacks calls the “psychological vulnerability of the stranger. ... The stranger is one who lives outside the normal securities of home and belonging. He or she is, or feels, alone — and, throughout the Torah, God is especially sensitive to the sigh of the oppressed, the feelings of the rejected, the cry of the unheard.”

Sacks writes that in the ancient world, “Hatred of the foreigner is the oldest of passions, going back to tribalism and the prehistory of civilization.” This is reflected in the story of Joseph when his brothers visit him in Egypt. When it came time to eat, the book of Genesis records, “They served him (Joseph) by himself, the brothers by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because Egyptians could not eat with Hebrews, for that is detestable to Egyptians.” (Gen. 43:32).

Not only did the Torah teach that we should not ill-treat or oppress the stranger, but Jesus also tells of those who would be blessed because, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. ... Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:34-40).

The same can be found in the letter from the Apostle Paul to the Hebrews: “Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” (Hebrews 13:1-2). In addition, the letter from John says, “Beloved,

you are acting faithfully in whatever you accomplish for the brethren, and especially when they are strangers.” (3 John 1:5).

We find similar admonishments in Islamic, Hindu and other religious texts. The Qur’an says, “Do good unto your parents, and near of kin, and unto orphans, and the needy, and the neighbor from among your own people, and the neighbor who is a stranger” (from Surah 4:36). In the Hindu tradition we read, “Let a person never turn away a stranger from his house, that is the rule. Therefore a man should, by all means, acquire much food, for good people say to the stranger: “There is enough food for you”” (from Taittiriya Upanishad 1.11.2).

The religious traditions promote this approach to caring for the stranger, but also studies show that diversity and inclusion lead to more vibrant communities.

The Jewish and Christian Scriptures recognize another reason to treat everyone with respect, with the concept of all persons being created in God’s image. Rabbi Sacks writes, “What is revolutionary in this declaration is not that a human being could be in the image of God. That is precisely how kings of Mesopotamian city-states and pharaohs of Egypt were regarded. They were seen as the representatives, the living images, of the gods. That is how they derived their authority. The Torah’s revolution is the statement that not some, but all, humans share this dignity. Regardless of class, color, culture, or creed, we are all in the image and likeness of God.”

This means that all humans should be treated with dignity. This week is the special symposium in honor of one of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute’s founders, Richard Kaufman. In his doctoral dissertation, he said human dignity is the meta-value for Judaism and is derived from this feature of being created in God’s image.

It was also reflected in the acceptance speech given by Elie Wiesel when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. He said, “When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion or political views, that place must — at that moment — become the center of the universe.”

In today’s environment, will we allow fear of the stranger, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and other types of hate speech, and even violence, to grow? Or, will we heed the lessons of our various faith traditions to respect all persons, love our neighbor and even the stranger? This is “that moment,” the “center of the universe,” calling for all persons of goodwill to affirm human dignity as a meta-value.

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