

**Viewing the Other: From Hostility to  
Hospitality**  
**World Religions Share their Wisdom**  
**Study Unit 2: Judaism**

**The Elijah Interfaith Institute**

*Where Is Wisdom Found*

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## PART I

### SOURCES FOR DISCUSSION

Orientation: Below are three clusters of texts taken from the Jewish tradition. Each cluster addresses some aspect of the attitude to the other, and of the tensions of hostility and hospitality in relation to the other. Depending on time and interest, choose one or more of the following topics for group study and discussion. The questions for discussion following each cluster of texts are helpful suggestions, but they need not limit the direction your discussion takes.

#### **Theme One: Attitude to the Alien in Society**

*You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger*

1. You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.

- Exodus 23:9

2. You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

- Exodus 22:20

3. When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God.

- Leviticus 19:34

4. You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

- Deuteronomy 10:19

5. You shall not eat anything that has died a natural death; give it to the stranger in your community to eat, or you may sell it to the foreigner. For you are a people consecrated to the Lord your God.

- Deuteronomy 14:21



*The hospitality of Abraham,  
by Leslie Xureb*

6. You and the alien who resides with you shall have the same law and the same ordinance.

- Numbers 15,16

### **For Discussion**

1. In what way do these sources address human nature and social reality, and

what vision to they bring to it?

2. In what ways is the status of the alien similar and in what ways is it different from that of the “majority”? suggest ways for accounting for these similarities and differences.
3. Who is the alien in our society today, and what lessons can these texts teach us?
4. What forces might prevent these biblical injunctions from being implemented? Share historical information and insight you may have, regarding the practice of these verses and these ideals, both in Judaism and in other religions.



Michelangelo's Creation of Man

## **Theme Two – Religious Hostility and the Imperative of Love**

7. And in the Greatness of Your excellency You overthrow those who rise up against You (Ex. 15,7)- You have shown yourself exceedingly great against those who rose up

**VIEWING THE OTHER**

against *You*. And who are they that rose up against You? They that rose up against Your children. It is not written here “You overthrow them that rise up against *us*, but: “You overthrow them that rise up against *You*.” Scripture thereby tells that if one rises up against Israel it is as if he rose up against Him by whose word the world came into being. And so it also says: “Forget not the voice of Your adversaries, the tumult of those that rise up against You which ascend continually” (Ps. 74,23)... And it is written: “Do not I hate them, O Lord that hate You”, etc. How so? “I hate them with utmost hatred; they are my enemies” (Ps. 139, 21-22)

- Mekhilta De Rabbi Ishmael, Shirata, Chapter 5, to Ex. 15,7.

*The heart must be filled  
with love for all.*

8. “I will render vengeance to My adversaries” - this refers to the Samaritans...

“And will recompense them that hate Me” - this refers to the heretics, as it is said, “Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate You?”

- (Ps. 139,21) Sifrei Deuteronomy 331, to Deut. 32,40.

9.
  - i. The heart must be filled with love for all.
  - ii. The love of all creation comes first, then comes the love for all humankind, and then follows love for the Jewish people, in which all other loves are included, since

it is the destiny of the Jews to serve toward the perfection of all things. All these loves are to be expressed in practical action, by pursuing the welfare of those we are bidden to love, and to seek their advancement...

- iii. The love for people must be alive in heart and soul, a love for all people and a love for all nations, expressing itself in a desire for their spiritual and material advancement; hatred may direct itself only toward the evil and filth in the world....
- iv. The degree of love in the soul of the righteous embraces all creatures, it excludes nothing, and no people or tongue....
- v. Though our love for people must be all-inclusive, embracing the wicked as well, this in no way blunts our hatred for evil itself; on the contrary it strengthens it. For it is not because of the dimension of evil clinging to a person that we include them in our love, but because of the good in them, which our love tells us is to be found everywhere....
- vi. Much effort is needed to broaden the love for people to the proper level, at which it must pervade life to its fullest depth. This must be done in opposition to the superficial view, which suggests itself initially on the basis of inadequate study of the Torah and of conventional morality, and where it would seem as though there is a contradiction to such love, or, at least, indifference to it. The highest level of love for people is the love due to the individual person; it must embrace every single individual, regardless of differences in views on religion, or differences of race or climate. It is essential to understand the cultures of different nations and groupings, to study their characteristics and their life-styles in order to know how to base our human love on foundations that will readily translate themselves into action.... The narrow-mindedness that leads one to view whatever is outside a particular nation, even what is outside the Jewish people, as ugly and defiling, is a phase of the frightful darkness....

- Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook  
The Moral Principles

### **For Discussion**

The first two passages quoted above were composed around the second or third century of the common era, and appear in early rabbinic commentaries on the bible, called *midrash*. The third passage was written by a 20<sup>th</sup> Century Jewish mystic, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who was first Chief Rabbi of then Palestine.

1. Consider the types of attitudes expressed in these passages. How would you characterize the difference between them?
2. What are the circumstances under which hatred and hostility are expressed and justified? What proof texts are brought to justify such hostility?
3. What would account for the difference in tone found in Rabbi Kook's works?
4. Does Rabbi Kook's view reject the earlier view, or in some way incorporate it?
5. Do similar polarities and tensions exist in the sources of other religious traditions? What would be the criteria in light of which we would prefer one position over another?

*Because all of mankind shares in the divine image, all human beings are entitled to respect.*

**Theme Three –  
Religious Pluralism and**

**Knowledge of the One God**

10. And when you look up at the sky and behold the sun and the moon and the stars, the whole heavenly host, you must not be lured bowing down to them or serving them. These the Lord your God allotted to other peoples everywhere under heaven;

but you the Lord took and brought out of Egypt, that iron blast furnace, to be His very own people, as is now the case.

- Deuteronomy 4:19-20

11. In the days to come,  
The Mount of the Lord's House  
Shall stand firm above the mountains  
And tower above the hills;  
And all the nations  
Shall gaze on it with joy,  
And the many peoples shall go and say:  
"Come,  
Let us go up to the Mount of the Lord,  
To the House of the God of Jacob;  
That He may instruct us in His ways,  
And that we may walk in His paths."

*Let us go up to the Mount of the  
Lord... That He may instruct us  
in His ways.*

- Isaiah 2:2-3

### **For Discussion**

Contrast the views of these two biblical passages towards others and their religion. Consider the advantages of each view for a contemporary attitude to other traditions. Consider analogous views from your own religious tradition. Which viewpoint do you subscribe to?

## **PART II**

### **BACKGROUND ESSAY: BETWEEN SURVIVAL AND COMPASSION IN JUDAISM'S ATTITUDE TO THE OTHER**



## The Particular and the Universal

Although Judaism is a religion constituted by the story of one particular people and its relationship with God, the biblical narrative of that people's history begins with the creation of the world. That narrative device immediately suggests that Israel's story, indeed, Israel's very particularity, has implications for all humanity. It also suggests that Jewish life and Jewish thought will be called upon, over the course of history, to deal with the interplay between the particularistic and universal aspects of Israel's story. Does Israel's distinctiveness imply xenophobia (or even hostility) *vis à vis* the wider world, or is the Jewish tradition hospitable to those outside it?

Judaism begins with a covenant, either the one made by God with Abraham or the one made by God with all Israel at Mt. Sinai. The covenant, like a marriage (to which the Prophets sometimes compare it), implies an identity-forming relationship from which others are excluded. And yet, the biblical account — which begins, as noted, with the creation of the world and includes a covenant with all humanity as well, represented by Noah — forces us to recall the universal context of the covenant with Israel, teaching us that Israel's story is intended to fulfill a goal shared by all humanity. The distinctive focus on Israel may be seen as the result of others (i.e. Noah's descendants except for the line culminating in Abraham) sinning and falling away, leaving only Israel as worthy partners with God; or it may be seen as an illustration, through one nation's experience, of the particularity that is part of the nature of humanity. Either way, Israel's particular experience points to universal lessons.

***Israel's very particularity has implications for all humanity.***

Several components of the Bible's creation story seem to stress the unity of mankind. Humans alone are created not as a species but as an individual, who becomes the common ancestor of all humanity. Because all of mankind thus shares in the divine image, all human beings are entitled to respect for their lives and dignity, and the shedding of anyone's blood is prohibited. But however important those themes are in the creation story, man's creation in God's image is not thereafter specifically referred to in the Hebrew Bible. It is man as an individual, as an archetype, that is said to be in the image of God. Humanity, however, turns out to be organized through social, national, and religious collectives, which establish rival identities for human beings. And that, in turn, suggests an ongoing clash between the competing values of universality and particularity. The balance Judaism has struck

between these values has varied over the course of history.

A further complication grows out of Judaism's position—unique among world religions — as a religion associated with a particular people, the people of Israel. Membership in the religion is identical with membership in the people and vice versa. Membership in a people and adherence to a system of beliefs and practices can exercise competing claims — as, for example, in the contemporary State of Israel, where Jewish identity for the first time is associated with participation in a modern nation state — and can also result in different ways of relating to outsiders, to the “other.”

*Israel is not to treat others  
as it itself was treated in  
Egypt.*

### **The Torah's Teachings**

As a nation, Israel over the millennia has suffered from adversarial relations with other nations. Exile, suffering, anti-Semitism, and, ultimately, the Nazi horror have taken a toll on the Jewish psyche,

leaving it fearful and suspicious of the “other” and worried about Jewish survival. More recently, the State of Israel's ongoing war with some or all of its neighbors has continued to justify this xenophobia and concern for survival. But while these attitudes have been manifested by the Jewish people, Judaism as a religion maintains a very different spiritual vision of the “other,” characterized by hospitality and regard for universal humanity. The interplay between the teachings of this religious vision on the one hand and the consequences of a tragic history on the other has had a profound effect on how Jews have conceived of the “other” and warrants recurring reexamination and re-articulation of that concept.

Although Israel's early history, as recounted in the Bible, describes the emergence of a distinctive, particular group, the attitude of that group toward the “other” is anything but hostile. In large part, that attitude reflects important aspects of Israel's formative experience: wandering and exile. Abraham is referred to as a “wandering Aramean” (Deuteronomy 26:5), directed to go forth from his father's home to a new land (Genesis 12:1-3). In that land, God promises, he will become “a great nation,” but the divine promise concludes with the statement that “through you, all the families of the earth will be blessed.” Abraham's wandering thus becomes the beginning of one distinctive nation, but that nation is to bring blessing to all mankind.

Exile — the enslavement in Egypt — was Israel's formative experience, through which they were unified as a people and prepared to be brought closer to God. The

Egyptian exile left its imprint on Israel's historical experience, serving as the archetype for future challenges; in the words of the Passover Haggadah: "In every generation, each person is required to see themselves as if they left Egypt." The victim's natural reaction to the experience of exile and oppression is to turn inward, seeking one's own liberation and the fall of the oppressor. But the Torah recasts the experience in very different terms, citing it as a basis for compassion, understanding, and generosity toward the "other."

Naturally, the compassionate attitude toward the "other" cannot come into play while one is still in exile, subservient to the oppressor. But once Israel is secure in its promised homeland, the Torah commands compassionate treatment of the *ger*—the outsider (literally translated as "foreigner," "alien," or "sojourner") dwelling within the nation but not part of it — on the grounds that Israel itself had that status in Egypt (It is important to keep in mind that *ger* in this sense differs from the later use of the term to refer to a convert to Judaism. Most scholars agree that the formal conversion processes had not yet been developed in biblical times; and the term *ger* refers to any foreigner living in the midst of ancient Israel.).

*A landless victim was neither inclined nor able to show hospitality. Xenophobia became the dominant attitude.*

The Torah makes two principal demands regarding treatment of the *ger*: they are to be afforded full equality before the law, and be treated with a loving attitude. These admonitions are frequently reiterated, and their rationale, also repeated, is that Israel is not to treat others as it itself was treated in Egypt. The requirement is not simply a legal one; it is psychological as well: "you shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9; see also (Exodus 22:20; Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy 10:19).

The Torah's instructions for how to treat a *ger* provide a powerful grounding for a concept of hospitality and acceptance of the "other" as an equal part of society, a grounding based on Israel's historical memory and, more specifically, on the quality of soul and heart produced in Israel through its exile in Egypt.

## Theory Encounters History

As important as the Torah's ideals are to Jewish life, the Torah's teachings with respect to the *ger* generally do not reflect the attitudes toward the "other" found in most Jewish communities. The Torah spoke of a time when Jews lived independently on their land and could recall past exile, but the later course of history saw the Jews

plunged back into a harsh and enduring exile. The attitudes contemplated by the Torah gave way to a hardness born of continued suffering and a constant battle for survival: simply put, a landless victim was neither inclined nor able to show hospitality. Xenophobia became the dominant attitude, with hostility a recurring subtext.

Survival became and remains a Jewish concern, almost an obsession. The perceived risks are not only of physical destruction

***God is the ultimate host,  
and all humans are aliens  
in His sight.***

but also of spiritual assimilation into the wider culture. These concerns persist in modern Israel, even after a half-century of independence, and contribute to the turning inward. That turning inward appears to be more than a mere reaction to the ongoing hostility of Israel's neighbors, for it tends to be expressed in inhospitality and even hostility toward the non-hostile "other," such as foreign workers. Indeed, there is a risk that, for some

Israelis, one's own identity is defined primarily through antagonism to the "other."

How the alien is received has been affected as well by changes in the concept of the *ger*. As noted, the Bible leaves the term relatively vague; but later Judaism established clear boundaries between one considered a Jew and one not considered a Jew. The clear distinctions may reflect heightened tensions between Jews and non-Jews or they may simply grow out of the general rabbinic quest for clarity, definition, and clear boundaries. In either case, they have become normative and, in effect, have changed the basic antinomy from Israel/resident-alien to Jew/non-Jew. The term *ger* is applied to one who has converted to Judaism in accordance with the established procedures. The *ger* is no longer an "other" within the community; he or she is one formerly part of the now entirely external "other," who has given up their "otherness" and become part of the people. As a practical matter, the Torah's discussion of the proper attitude to the *ger* has become superfluous, for the *ger* is no longer a stranger, and strangers are entirely external

The redefinition of the *ger* has a further implication, shifting the definition of what constitutes the community and its primary moral and religious concerns. In biblical religion, a crucial concern was treatment of the alien, but for rabbinic Judaism, the defining religious force became clear establishment of the Torah's norms. Jewish society is defined as a society of Torah; and Israel in its renewed state of exile is more concerned with its own security and survival than with the status of

the stranger.

### **Focusing on God**

This swing of the pendulum toward xenophobia/hostility may suggest a need within Judaism to refocus on the divine component of the covenant—God, rather than the life of Israel — as the central orienting principle of its adherents’ spiritual lives. That renewed focus on God can promote a renewed awareness of Judaism’s commonalities with all humanity. Interestingly, the word *ger* itself, as used in the later strata of biblical literature evokes that sense: it comes to refer not to strangers within Israel or to Israel’s status in Egypt but to the status of all humanity before God (1 Chronicles 29:15) God is the ultimate host, and all humans are aliens in His sight. This theocentric point of view is at the heart of Judaism’s vision for the flourishing of all humanity and of its own broad mission to humanity — a mission that tends to be seen more narrowly when Israel’s covenanted way of life is placed at the focus of Jewish consciousness.

The narrower view of Judaism’s vision for humanity at large is captured in legal terms: observance of the seven so-called Noachide commandments. Those commandments (to be contrasted with the 613 traditionally regarded as binding on Jews), constitute a series of basic moral obligations indispensable to a well-ordered moral life, but they do not promote the development of a human being’s relationship

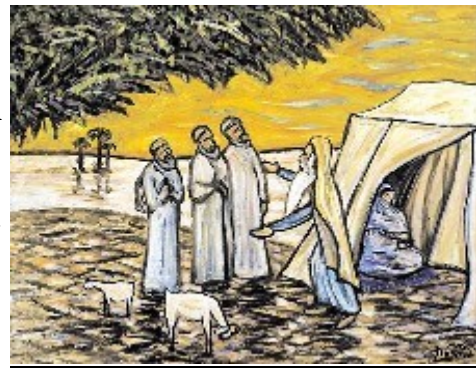
with God. Judaism's mission is to spread these commandments, and its contribution to humanity is thus understood to be a well-ordered moral life.

The broader (or, perhaps, deeper) Jewish vision for human wellbeing involves the knowledge of God as a complement to the moral life. It implies that there are a variety of ways to come to know God and that a non-Jew need not embrace Judaism in order to move beyond the threshold of the ordered moral life and achieve further spiritual advancement.

Both of these visions are present in Judaism as a matter of theory and aspiration, but neither is the subject of a concrete program of actions. Because of its history, Judaism senses itself as too vulnerable to undertake an active program of mission to the nations.

### **Compassion as a Key to Spiritual Revival**

One possible approach to redirecting Judaism toward its universalistic pole would proceed by recognizing and acting upon the central place of compassion as value taught by Judaism. R. Nachman of Bratslav, a late-eighteenth-early-nineteenth century Hasidic thinker, regarded God's compassion, and His desire to reveal it, as the reason God created the world. Compassion thus pervades all creation, according to R. Nachman, and it is closely tied



*Abraham and three visitors, by David Avisar*

to knowledge, understanding, and faith. In having compassion, a person emulates God, and the spiritual path is one that transforms other tendencies—such as anger and cruelty — into compassion. Among the practical expressions of compassion is judging others favorably, finding virtue rather than fault (That is not to say, however, that compassion should be extended naively and limitlessly; it should not be shown to a wicked person who takes its power and applies it to cruelty.).

Against that background, it may be argued that compassion is central to Israel's identity and has a bearing on its relation to other peoples. It finds expression, among other ways, in the battle against idolatry, which is associated with cruelty. Extending compassion to the "other" can offer a way to overcome the xenophobia and hostility generated by historical enmity and restore Israel's self-perception as a light to the nations.

## Questions for Discussion

1. As discussed in the text, the Bible sets up a tension between the universal and the particular; between the creation of all mankind in God's image and God's unique covenantal relationship with Israel. Why might the biblical authors have wanted God to enter into a covenantal relationship with one particular people? Why not simply stop with the universal values reflected in the concept of creation of all mankind in God's image?
2. Is hospitable (or compassionate) treatment of a stranger the same as full acceptance? Is there a risk it can become patronizing?
3. Can one reasonably declare oneself to be "a light to the nations" without offending those nations' sensibilities?
4. Does oppression justify a victim's hostility toward his oppressor? Is there merit to "loving one's enemies" instead?
5. While active hostility to the "other" is always destructive, can the promotion of xenophobia be justified as a means for combating ethnic or religious assimilation?
6. As a practical matter, how does one go about defining the class of people to whom compassion should be extended? There's an adage that "one who is compassionate to the cruel is destined to be cruel to the compassionate." Can there be objective standards for determining who is "cruel" for purposes of invoking that adage?

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The Essay Collection: “Religion, Society and the Other” is available at [www.elijah-interfaith.org](http://www.elijah-interfaith.org)

Paper presenting Jewish perspective “The Battle for Survival, the Struggle for Compassion” authored by Alon Goshen-Gottstein

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