

Online Bible Study Discussion Starters
Gleaning from Leviticus, Number Four
May 29, 2007

Leviticus 16:29-31 (NRSV)

This shall be a statute for you forever: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall deny yourselves [or fast], and shall do no work, neither the citizen nor the alien who resides among you. For on this day atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the LORD. It is a sabbath of complete rest to you, and you shall deny yourselves; it is a statute forever.

These three verses come from the section of Leviticus on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. Much could be said of Yom Kippur itself, biblically and currently within Judaism, but for this “gleaning,” I’ve chosen these verses for the words, “nor the alien who resides among you.”

The Hebrew word is *ger*, which rhymes with hair and has a hard “g” as in “got.” The plural is *gerim*, with the accent on the second syllable, pronounced more or less as gair-EEM. The word *ger* refers to a person living and working as a foreigner in the land, a non-Israelite resident within the boundaries of Israel.

In the Older Testament, the *ger* is a person of special concern because (1) such a person is always vulnerable to prejudice, exploitation, and abuse and (2) the Israelites themselves had been *gerim* in Egypt where they were exploited and abused. The *ger* is listed throughout the Older Testament as one of the three persons representing those vulnerable to oppression or neglect: the *ger*, the widow, and the orphan. All three are vulnerable because they lack the present support of tribe and clan, and in a tribal society, that lack of support makes one an easy target. The Bible, however, makes it quite clear that Yahweh God is the supporter of all left vulnerable in society. The second point is a powerful reminder: *do not oppress the ger because you have been gerim and know how it feels to be oppressed and humiliated.*

Genesis tells us the children of Israel went to Egypt to escape a famine. There they traded their labor for food. At first, they were treated kindly because of Joseph, but Exodus tells us that in time “there came a king who did not know Joseph,” meaning a king who had no regard for him. Then the Egyptians enslaved their foreign workers, the children of Israel.

Both Leviticus and Deuteronomy (5:12-15) command the Israelites not to make their piety false and offensive to God by taking the day off but keeping their slaves or foreign workers laboring for their benefit. That would be having their cake and eating it, too. How nice to “deny themselves” by taking a day of rest while the profits of labor keep coming in! How phony.

It's easy enough to see greed's logic. *The foreigners don't observe Yom Kippur, do they? No, of course not. So, why do they need the day off?* Greed's logic is false, and Yahweh God will not stand for it. On a Sabbath, the whole land is to be at rest, even the draft animals. Yahweh God is not honored by self-denial that is a sham made profitable by the exploitation of foreign laborers. How convenient it would be to have non-believers available to keep working so our day of self-denial costs us nothing.

The *gerim* are always to be included in feasts held in celebration of the goodness of Yahweh. They are never to be left out. They work Yahweh's land, pick the harvest of God's abundant goodness, and they must be included in the joy and thanksgiving that follow the harvest.

Yesterday, I sat for a while on our front porch and started a book about the war in Vietnam. Many of our neighbors I saw and others passing by on Commerce Street were *gerim*. Leviticus will have more to say about these foreigners who are our neighbors.