

And You Think We Have Immigration Issues!

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The Supreme Court issued a ruling about immigration but the arguing will surely go on. Perhaps it should lighten our hearts that immigration issues are as old as the hills...certainly as old as the hills of Israel.

The story of the Jewish people is one of migration. Abraham goes from Mesopotamia to Israel to Egypt and back to Israel. We repeated these maneuvers as a people. This isn't an accident. The superpowers of the ancient world were the river cultures of the Tigris and Euphrates and the Nile. This makes sense...in an arid region; these cultures had reliable water sources so they could develop more advanced societies. Israel forms a land bridge between these two titans.

Vast migrations of people passed through the land of Israel and, naturally, Judaism set about defining who was in, who was out, and who was in between in terms of membership in society. One of the terms they used to understand people who were "in between" was a *ger toshav*, a resident alien.

One place we learn about such people is in this passage:

A resident alien on Shabbat is like a Jew on a holiday. Just as a Jew bakes and cooks but is forbidden to work, so the resident alien bakes and cooks on Shabbat but may not work.

Just as a Jew on the intermediate days of a holiday collects from the field but may not harvest the field wholesale, so may a resident alien do on Shabbat...

Just as a Jew ploughs, sows and harvests during the rest of the year, so the resident alien does on Shabbat.

The reliable tradition is according to the last opinion. (Y. Yebamot 8:1)

The text here lays out a range of options as to what the resident alien might be or do. It is a long passage that delineates between slaves (non-people), resident aliens (people who do not have full membership in society) and Jews (full members of society). (This is also the place that talks about conversion in both Yerushalmi and Bavli.)

Discussion Questions:

1. Why would the sages side with the most lenient view here? What benefit would this give to society?
2. How can we welcome the resident alien into the Jewish community today? For example, if there is a family in which one of the parents is a non-Jew, how may they take part in the synagogue's life?
3. Can a person be in the process of becoming Jewish? If so, how can s/he move comfortably from religion X to Judaism? Is the *ger toshav* a useful framework today? Any practical stories are welcome.

As always, looking forward to your insights!