Preparing for Passover

March 20, 2026 Rabbi Barry H. Block

One of the most interesting words in the Hebrew language is גר (*ger*). גר is the term we use to refer to a convert, one who began their life not being part of the Covenant of Abraham and Sarah but who has since joined our Jewish people. גר has meant "convert" since the days of our rabbinic sages, but before that, in the Bible, it meant something different.

Rabbi Shai Held explained the word's biblical meaning in an unlikely place, an opinion piece in the New York *Times*, last month: "The Bible explicitly commands three loves. The first and second many modern Christians and Jews cite easily — love of God and love of one's neighbor. The third, and most often overlooked, is love of the *ger*. Several English translations interpret *ger* as 'sojourner,' someone born elsewhere who has come to dwell among the people, most likely temporarily. Other translations render *ger* as 'stranger,' 'alien' or 'foreigner.' In recent decades, some biblical scholars have returned to an older idea: that *ger* should be translated as something close to 'immigrant.' Writing about the book of Exodus, the 11th-century Jewish biblical commentator Rashi explains that 'wherever *ger* occurs in Scriptures it signifies a person who has not been born in that land where [they are] living but has come from another country to sojourn there.'"[i]

Jews take very seriously the requirement to remember the גר, having been גרים (*gerim*, the plural of גר) in the Land of Egypt, a commandment repeated thirty-six times in Torah and particularly emphasized at Passover. We may be tempted to think that גר means "slave" in this context, since that was our people's status immediately prior to redemption. Slave, though, is an entirely different word in Hebrew: עבד (*eved*, plural עבדים, *avadim*). Throughout our people's mythic sojourn in Egypt, the Children of Israel are גרים, only becoming עבדים at the end.

You might have heard me say in the past that the exodus is the Jewish people's true story, whether or not it's an historical event. By contrast, we **know** our people's exile in Babylon to have happened. Jerusalem's First Temple was destroyed in 586 B.C.E., and all the elites of Judea—the royal family, the priests, and everyone who was literate—were deported to Babylon.

This week, at the annual Central Conference of American Rabbis convention, Professor Daniel Fisher-Livne taught that today's consensus among Bible scholars is that the Torah was assembled by Israelites who came home after

the Persian King Cyrus permitted them to return and rebuild the Temple. There, they found that their fellow Judeans had strayed from fidelity to the God of Israel after decades without their leaders. Cyrus allowed them to reconstruct the Temple, but he didn't fund it. Solomon, who had built the First Temple, had amassed great wealth as ruler of a vast realm. Now, the Judeans were vassals, impoverished, with the means to construct only a humble sanctuary. These were poor immigrants, many of them the children and grandchildren of those who had been exiled. Other Judeans remained in Babylon or moved on to Persia, finding greater comfort in diaspora—that is, as immigrants who would stay.

That immigrant experience would come to define the Jewish people for twenty-five hundred years. Yes, a community always lived in Judea by whatever name, eventually Palestine and then also Israel. And yet, wherever our people lived—in Babylon and Persia, and eventually spreading across West Asia, North Africa, and Europe, and finally to the Americas and around the globe, always as immigrants. Wherever the Jewish people lived outside Judea, we were not at home. Even when we have prospered in lands that welcomed us for centuries, our neighbors did not regard Jews as natives, however homeborn, and our ancestors yearned to return to native soil that most never saw. Only after the Enlightenment did Jews begin to see themselves and to be regarded by some of their neighbors as citizens of the nations in which we have lived. That immigrant status, though, being regarded as "other," never came to an end, as we now experience as Jews in America, circa 2026. The title of Pamela Nadell's new, award-winning book, *Antisemitism: An American Tradition*, says it all too well.

The result is that American Jews understand ours to be an immigrant community, even as other ethnic groups, at least those with white skin, whose ancestors came to these shores at similar time periods increasingly see themselves as "heritage Americans."

Professor Elsie Stern, Editor of the New Reform Torah Commentary, argues that Israelites are not the Torah's only immigrants. She reminded me this week that Adam and Eve, the biblical ancestors of all humans, are expelled from the Garden, forced to live as immigrants wherever they reside. Noah and his family are banished from dry land altogether, sojourning in an Ark to a postdiluvian world in which they, too, are newcomers. The story of the flood is followed by the Tower of Babel, resulting in a multiplicity of languages, with the unsuccessful builders exiled from Babel—that is, Babylon—as the Judeans descended from one of them would be centuries later.

Torah, therefore, regards **all** humans as immigrants.

Rabbi Held explains why that matters: "Readers of the Bible are thus invited to engage in a double act of moral imagination. First, they must imagine that they themselves, and not merely their ancestors, were redeemed from slavery in Egypt. And, second, they must ask themselves who in their midst is most vulnerable to abuse and exploitation." Though he stipulates that this principle doesn't require open borders or prescribe how many immigrants or refugees America or any other nation must admit, Held insists: "The biblical text also admonishes societies to offer immigrants legal protections, fair wages and social benefits [that are modern equivalents of] harvest gleanings and tithes for the poor. In a truly good society, the immigrant cannot be left dependent on other people's generosity. The law must also ensure [their] well-being."[ii]

In the twelve days ahead, we will be cleaning the house in anticipation of Passover, ridding the cupboards and the refrigerator of leavened products, arduously sourcing matzah and other Passover necessities in Central Arkansas, and preparing for the Seder. As demanding and meaningful as all that may be, it is not as important as the key preparation we must do, this year more than ever. Passover is the most potent time of year for us to recognize that **we** are immigrants, that the people around us are immigrants—indeed, that all humanity are merely sojourners on this Earth. If we find ourselves free at this moment, that is a great privilege, a gift from God, conferring upon us an added responsibility to love and to see to the wellbeing of those who are not. Let us make time amidst our physical preparations this year to ready ourselves to redouble our advocacy for immigrants.

For this task, our people has been called into covenant with the Creator. With אהבת עולם (*ahavat olam*), boundless love, God has given us a Torah that, studied properly, teaches that **all** humans are immigrants, implanting within the Jewish people an acute awareness that we are wanderers, putting down only temporary roots wherever we make our homes. This Passover, let us heed God's commandment to love the immigrant, for we were immigrants in the land of Egypt, for we and all humanity have always and everywhere been immigrants.

Amen.

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[i] Shai Held, "One of the Bible's Greatest Moral Revolutions, The New York *Times*, February 22, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/22/opinion/immigrants-religion-bible-politics.html.
[ii] Held.