Another People in the Land

Shabbat Eikev 5786

July 31, 2026 Rabbi Barry H. Block

Twenty-five years ago, America suffered the first significant foreign attack on the homeland since 1812 when terrorists hijacked four airplanes, ramming one into each of the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York and a third into the Pentagon, across the Potomac from Washington, D.C. The fourth plane was brought down in the woods of Pennsylvania by passengers who sacrificed their lives to save many more. The perpetrators were promptly identified as members of al-Qaeda, a terrorist organization of Muslim extremists who had perverted their religion into a homicidal and suicidal cult.

Some Americans rushed to blame all Muslims, indeed Islam itself, despite a clarion call by President George W. Bush at the Islamic Center in Washington on September 16, 2001: "The face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. That's not what Islam is all about. Islam is peace…When we think of Islam, we think of a faith that brings comfort to a billion people around the world…America counts millions of Muslims amongst our citizens, and Muslims make an incredibly valuable contribution to our country… In our anger and emotion, our fellow Americans must be treated with respect."[i]

Despite the president's words, many Americans took out their anger on Muslim neighbors. Ten years after the attack, a Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice study found that federal authorities had "investigated over 800 incidents since 9/11 involving violence, threats, vandalism, and arson against Arab-Americans, Muslims, Sikhs, South-Asian Americans and other individuals perceived to be of Middle Eastern origin. The incidents [included] assaults resulting in serious injury and death; and vandalism, shootings, arson and bombings directed at homes, businesses, and places of worship."[ii]

The night of September 11, I found myself in a television studio with an imam and a Baptist minister, jointly calling for calm and tolerance. Then, in the months that followed, I repeatedly had to come to the defense of both Islam and

Muslims in the face of self-appointed experts on Islam who cherry-picked Koranic passages allegedly promoting violence and hate—often, specifically against Jews.

I am no expert on the Koran. By contrast, I do know Torah, and the Koranic verses being quoted to me rhymed uncomfortably with words in this week's Torah portion and others. Would any of us wish our religions to be judged by the harshest words spoken about other peoples in our sacred but ancient scriptures?

Take, for example, God's reported injunction to the Israelites as they prepare to enter the Promised Land: "You shall destroy all the peoples that the Eternal your God delivers to you, showing them no pity…You shall consign the images of their gods to the fire…"[iii]

These words and others like them in our holy books inspire Jewish vigilantes who seek, in the words of *Haaretz*'s Dahlia Scheindlin, to "attack Palestinian areas deeper and deeper inside the West Bank, to force them to leave," noting, "One of the most infamous [violent] settlers, Elisha Yered, boasted openly of this strategy."[iv]

Scheindlin does not implicate Judaism itself. Still, vigilantes represent the same kind of perversion of Judaism that characterizes Islamist terrorists' misrepresentation of Islam. Jewish vigilantes may heed an eighteenth century rabbinic commentator who understood God's command to show the other people of the land "no pity," as intended "to warn you that, as a result of your misplaced pity, you will 'shoot yourself in the foot,' as their idols will be a snare unto you, eventually leading to your destruction instead of their death. Your pity will be counterproductive."[v] The purported danger of continuing to tolerate the presence of Palestinians in what settlers consider the Greater Land of Israel calls to mind the warning about permitting other people to live among or adjacent to the Israelites. At the same time, it ignores the Talmudic take on the passage, best explained by a medieval Spanish scholar, who wrote that: "Our sages in [the Talmud] state that [the commandment to wipe out idolators applied only] at the time when the Canaanites were being delivered into the hands of the Israelites during the years of conquest. Nowadays, [mistreating] Gentiles is certainly prohibited. In fact, the Talmud there describes stealing from Gentiles as a greater sin than stealing from

Israelites as it involves the desecration of [God's] name. The Jewish people are to be models of morality. [Otherwise,] we drag God's Torah into disrepute."[vi]

These days, here in America, we hear claims that immigrants disrupt a society's culture and threaten its safety. While our leaders speak of deporting undocumented immigrants who have committed violent crimes, they increasingly change the status of immigrants who came to this country legally and committed no crime, subjecting them to deportation. Last December, NPR reported, "The Trump administration has stripped legal status from 1.6 million immigrants in 11 months. It's the largest removal of deportation protection for legal migrants in U.S. history."[vii] Moreover, in April, David Bier of the Cato institute outlined the myriad ways that the administration has slashed avenues for immigrants to enter our country **legally**.[viii] The alleged problems, then, are immigration and immigrants themselves, not the legality of their immigration.

Stephen Miller, chief architect of President Trump's immigration strategy, has said that America should admit only immigrants who are "going to be supportive of our values, of our way of life, going to assimilate, going to integrate into our national culture.[ix] Given the policies he has designed, paired with his words, we come to understand that Miller abhors even **legal** immigration.

If we can take a step back from our Torah portion's merciless commandments about the people who dwelled in the land when the Israelites arrived, we will notice who the immigrants are in this story: Our own people! N**obody** on planet Earth is indigenous to this place or that. While some of us, Jewish Americans in particular, are acutely aware of our immigrant past, others somehow think of themselves as "heritage Americans," and I'm not talking about the humans who really did immigrate here first, native tribes.

Professors Elsie Stern and Daniel Fisher-Livne, co-editors of the New Reform Torah Commentary, teach that Torah was written by traumatized people—Judeans who were exiled to Babylon, purportedly because of their idolatry, and then returned to find that Judeans who had been left behind had assimilated into

the surrounding pagan culture. We may understand, even if we don't support, their reluctance to tolerate idol worshipers.

Much more, though, those same Torah authors correctly saw themselves as immigrants, as strangers. It's no surprise, then, that the Torah they crafted repeated the commandment to love the stranger thirty-six times. A better future can be achieved not by ethnically cleansing America, Israel, or any other land. Peace is built when we love the stranger, inviting them to love us in return.

Amen.

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[i] President George W. Bush, Remarks at the Islamic Center of Washington, D.C., September 16, 2001, https://hls.harvard.edu/today/remembering-911/.
[ii] Combating Post-9/11 Discriminatory Backlash, Civil Rights Division, U.S. Department of Justice, last updated August 6, 2015, https://www.justice.gov/crt/combating-post-911-discriminatory-backlash-6.
[iii] Deuteronomy 7:16, 25.
[iv] Dahlia Scheindlin, "Israelis Fight Over Framing of West Bank Attacks. But Settler Violence Is an Israeli Strategy," *Haaretz*, July 28, 2026.
[v] Or HaChaim on Deuteronomy 7:16.
[vi] Rabbeinu Bahya, Devarim 7:16.
[vii] Ximena Bustillo, Sergio Martinez-Beltran, "Limiting migration led to 1.6 million losing legal status in 2025," *All Things Considered*, NPR, December 22, 2025.
[viii] David J. Bier, "Trump Has Cut Legal Immigration More Than Illegal Immigration," *Cato at Liberty*, The Cato Institute, April 13, 2026.
[ix] "You Should Never Have Harmful Migration': Stephen Miller Highlights What Is Looked For In Migrants, *ForbesBreakingNews*, YouTube, May 31, 2025.