

Loving and protecting immigrants is a biblical command

The Hebrew Bible's instruction to love the neighbor appears only once. “Love the stranger” appears more than 35 times.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [May 9, 2018](#) issue



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Language is always more than a communication tool. It also shapes culture and affects relationships. When U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) recently issued a new mission statement eliminating wording that had celebrated "America's promise as a nation of immigrants," the shift marked a sharp political turn inward. Gone were the words of generous welcome in the previous statement like *providing*, *granting*, *promoting*, and *understanding*. In their place came verbs of

demarcation and fortification like *safeguarding*, *protecting* [Americans], and *securing* [the homeland]. The message of the changed language was unmistakable: it's time to focus more on keeping immigrants out than on allowing them in.

This development isn't entirely surprising. For generations, many Americans have been suspicious of newcomers, often disparaging strangers and demonizing immigrants. The term *alien* is more popular among xenophobes than *immigrant*. New strains of nationalism consider the country's very identity to be under threat from a breakup of shared cultural, racial, religious, and linguistic commonalities. Fear of the other produces language tinged with hostility.

So long as we view the immigrant more as stranger than as neighbor, we're bound to behave less hospitably. It might help if we could recognize that no person has "stranger" as his or her own self-definition or core identity. Strangeness isn't a personal characteristic of the people we don't know. Others merely appear strange to us from our vantage point. When we refer to someone as a "disabled person" instead of a "person living with disabilities," we impose a similar external opinion on that individual's primary identity. Our own vantage point ends up diminishing the richness of the other.

On this matter of the stranger, we should learn from the ancient Jews. Only once does the Hebrew Bible contain the command to love the neighbor (Lev. 19:18). More than 35 times, though, these same scriptures command one to love the stranger. Why the emphasis on stranger? "Our neighbor is one we love because he is like ourselves," says Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. "The stranger is one we are taught to love precisely because he is not like ourselves."

Modern Bible translations often use the term *stranger* or *alien* for the Hebrew word *ger*. *Ger* designates a sojourner who ends up living in a place other than his own home or home country. Particular laws and rights protected sojourners living in a foreign land. Mercy was shown to them. They were to be treated as "citizens of Israel . . . allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel" (Ezek. 47:22). Even Israel's own self-understanding as a nation was that of a sojourner. The coveted Land of Canaan belonged ultimately to God. "The land is mine . . . you are but aliens and tenants" (Lev. 25:23).

The drumbeat of disdain for immigrants today—foreign-born individuals who appear strange to us—is deplorable. With the majority of the blood flowing on American

streets bearing no connection to the exaggerated talk of immigrant crime, and with so much economic and cultural revitalization within communities owed to immigrant contributions, the chastisement of immigrants is repugnant. It's a shame that USCIS director Lee Francis Cissna couldn't help his agency adopt more generous language. Somewhere along the way, this proud son of a Peruvian immigrant must have missed a lesson about the Golden Rule, and about how a love for country doesn't have to stop at the borders.

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