

# The Other Greatest Commandment (Lev. 19:34)

Posted on [January 14, 2018](#) by [J.N. Tilton](#)



When questioned concerning which is the greatest of all the commandments, Jesus famously replied, *You must love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength* [Deut. 6:5], and *You must love your neighbor as yourself* [Lev. 19:18].<sup>[1]</sup> When Jesus selected these two verses he did so not only because of their sublime ethical content, but also because these two verses are formally similar. Both commandments begin in Hebrew with the single word **וְאַהַבְתָּ** (*v<sup>e</sup>'āhāvṭā*, “and you must love”).



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The Torah contains exactly four verses containing the command וְאָהַבְתָּ, two verses in Deuteronomy state, *And you must love the LORD your God* (Deut. 6:5; 11:1), and, for the purposes of our discussion, these may be regarded as duplicates. The other two verses containing “and you must love” commandments are found in Leviticus, but since they refer to different people groups they must be regarded as complimentary rather than as duplicates. Jesus’ highlighting of the “and you must love the LORD your God” commandments as the First Greatest Commandment and the “and you must love your neighbor” commandment as the Second Greatest Commandment inevitably elevated the status of the remaining “and you must love,” commandment, which is why I have referred to as the Other Greatest Commandment.

This Other Greatest Commandment reads as follows:

כְּאֶזְרָח מִכֶּם יִהְיֶה לָכֶם הַגֵּר הַגֵּר אֶתְכֶם וְאָהַבְתָּ לוֹ כְּמוֹךְ

The stranger living among you must be to you like the native born, and you must love [וְאָהַבְתָּ] him like yourself. (Lev. 19:34)

The urgent need for contemplating this Other Greatest Commandment has been thrust upon us by the xenophobic rhetoric and callous actions toward “strangers” we are witnessing in the present time.

Before plunging ahead with our inquiry, however, it will be necessary to answer an objection to the very premise of my argument: What proof have I that Jesus really did consider Lev. 19:34 to be the Other Greatest Commandment? Perhaps Jesus’ failure to explicitly mention Lev. 19:34 was

intentional. Perhaps from his silence we are meant to conclude that Jesus desired to exclude Lev. 19:34 from the list of Greatest Commandments.

This objection can be overcome by examining how Jesus responded to the question, “But who is my neighbor?” when he discussed the Greatest Commandments with fellow Torah expert (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus’ answer was delivered in the form of a parable about a man who went on a journey from Jerusalem down to Jericho and who was attacked by robbers and left for dead in the wilderness. Two passersby chose to ignore him, one was a priest the other was a Levite. Both had been the traveller’s fellow countrymen and kinsmen and coreligionists, but they had chosen not to act the part of neighbor. Fortunately for the poor traveller, a third person passed by. This man was a Samaritan, an outsider, an alien, a stranger.

Jews of Jesus’ day typically regarded Samaritans as descendants of the displaced persons whom the Assyrians settled in the former boundaries of the kingdom of Israel. In other words, first-century Jews viewed Samaritans as immigrants. The feeling, by the way, was mutual. The Samaritans regarded themselves as the descendants of Israelites who had never been deported in the wake of the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests. They thought of themselves as the permanent residents of Israel and regarded the Jewish returnees from Babylon as the new comers. In other words, the Samaritans considered the Jews to be immigrants.

And yet the Samaritan in Jesus’ parable had compassion on the Jewish traveller: he tended his wounds, found him lodgings, and paid for his accommodations. By loving the stranger like one of his own, the Samaritan fulfilled the commandment to love his neighbor. Which is to say, when asked to clarify the meaning of *you must love your neighbor* (Lev. 19:18) Jesus referred to the commandment *you must love the stranger* (Lev. 19:34). Jesus was fully aware of this other command to love, and implicitly included it as

the Other Greatest Commandment.

## The Meaning of גֵר (gēr)

The Hebrew term in the Other Greatest Commandment that I translated above as “stranger” is גֵר (gēr). Another common translation of גֵר is “sojourner.” It refers to someone who has left her native land and come to live among people whose customs and beliefs, and perhaps even language, are different from her own. A גֵר is someone who comes from the outside and stands out from others in the community he has moved into because his accent is strange, and the foods he eats are different, and so are the clothes he wears. The modern equivalent of גֵר is “immigrant.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Abraham the patriarch, who left his home and his relatives and his native land behind to follow God’s calling to Canaan, referred to himself as a גֵר (henceforth, “immigrant”),<sup>[3]</sup> and his family experienced all of the worst hardships and dangers common to immigrants: Abraham was defrauded, Sarah was kidnapped, Isaac was cheated, Jacob’s daughter Dinah was raped, the families of the twelve sons of Jacob were enslaved.

It will be necessary for us to bear in mind these meanings as we continue our discussion. First, the best modern equivalent for the biblical word גֵר is “immigrant.” And second, to be an immigrant means being vulnerable. An immigrant is at the mercy of his or her host community, and all too often mercy is in short supply.

## The Meaning of כָמוֹךָ (kāmōkhā, “like yourself”)

The Other Greatest Commandment says, *you must love him* [i.e., the immigrant] *like yourself* [כָמוֹךָ]. What does כָמוֹךָ (kāmōkhā, “like yourself”) mean? One interpretation that can be discarded immediately, since it is really

nothing other than a poorly veiled attempt to nullify the commandment, is to say “love him like yourself” means “love him *as much as* you love yourself.” In other words, before you can love others you must begin to love yourself, and before you can take care of others you first have to take care of your own—after all generosity begins at home—and in this time of unemployment and tight budgets we need to take care of domestic affairs and not worry about people from abroad. No, self-love is a quagmire, so we will move on.

The Hebrew word אָמַן can legitimately be interpreted in two ways. One is, “love the immigrant as you yourself would like to be loved if you were in his shoes.” The other is, “love the immigrant because she is just like you.”<sup>[4]</sup> The first way of interpreting “like yourself” calls us to use our compassionate imaginations to consider how we would feel if the tables were turned and we were the ones living as the minority in an unfamiliar culture. It requires us to apply the rule *do unto others as you would have them do unto you*.

The other way of interpreting “like yourself” summons us to view the immigrant with a deeper kind of wisdom that looks past superficial differences to see the core humanity everyone shares. We all have the same feelings of love and fear, joy and frustration, sadness, longing, and hope. We are all mortal. We are all fragile. We are all precious. We all have the same Creator, and each one of us is made in his image.

“Like yourself” also demands an honest reckoning of who we ourselves are, where we have come from, and where we might be going. Human beings are a migratory species. Everyone of us has ancestors who came from someplace else. We live where we do, not because we sprang out of the soil of our native lands, but because someone ventured to the place we now live. Go back enough generations and we are all the sons and daughters of immigrants. And given the way fortunes shift, it is likely enough that we will have children or grandchildren or great grandchildren who will emigrate to some other

place, even if we never do so ourselves. Wars, natural disasters, economic catastrophes, or the ineptitude or corruption of political leaders could one day drive us or our descendants from our homes. Some day we or our descendants will, in all likelihood, seek opportunity or shelter or welcome in a land not our own.

The command to love the immigrant who is “like yourself” requires the one who would obey it to be realistic about his or her own origins and about the destiny that is common to us all.

## **The Meaning of אַהַבְתָּ (v<sup>e</sup>’āhāvṭā, “and you must love”)**

What is entailed in the command to love the immigrant? Does the commandment require something more than feeling an emotional connection with immigrants? Are we expected to do more than pay lip service to the notion that we ought to be compassionate toward the strangers in our midst? The context in which the Other Greatest Commandment appears begins to spell out for us what loving the immigrant involves. Leviticus 19:33 states, *When an immigrant lives with you in your land, do not do him wrong.*

Having lived for two years outside my own native country, I caught a glimpse of some of the ways in which people can do wrong to the immigrant. My wife and I studied in Israel, but whereas the university had married housing for Israeli students there was no married housing for overseas students, such as ourselves. This meant that at the very time when we had the least command of the local language we were required to search for an apartment to rent in Jerusalem. One of the apartments we looked at seemed ideal. It was within walking distance of the university, the apartment was just the right size, and the rent was affordable. We met with the landlords and everything seemed fine until they realized that we were not Jewish. A shadow crossed the faces of

the landlord and landlady when this fact about our heritage came to light, and although they recovered themselves and continued to converse with us in a polite manner, shortly after the meeting concluded we received a message from the landlords that the plans of the apartment's current tenant had changed, with the result that the apartment we wanted would no longer be available.

As I am sure you can imagine, my wife and I were sorely disappointed, and I was rather skeptical of their excuses. My suspicions were confirmed when we saw the very same apartment advertised again a few days later. I telephoned the landlords and asked about the apartment, which they said was indeed available, until I revealed my identity. Then, once more, they denied us the rental. It was the first time I had ever experienced discrimination. I felt, in a very small way, the frustration and resentment and indignation of being mistreated because of prejudice. I also felt as a sense of powerlessness. There was no one I could turn to stand up for our rights. Fortunately, things turned out very well for us. We found another apartment on the very same street belonging to devout Jewish landlords who had come from Iraq. They treated us with such kindness and affection that it more than made up for our earlier misadventure. "You are like family to us," Nurit, our landlady, would often say.

Other times people took advantage of our lack of fluency in Hebrew. I was able to understand far more than I was able to articulate, so I was not unaware of slights, but was unable to adequately defend myself. Occasionally someone would attempt to charge us exorbitant prices, knowing that I could not argue back. And more than once I had exchanges with people who radiated with impatience at my best efforts to communicate.

I do not wish to suggest that my overall experience in Israel was bad, or that Israel is worse in its treatment of strangers than other countries, or that I

have experienced anything like the hardships immigrants face every day in my own country. I was in Israel because I wanted to be there. I was privileged to study at one of the world's top universities, and to be taught by some of the most brilliant scholars in my field of study. My wife and I received the warmest and most affectionate hospitality from our landlords I have every experienced anywhere I have ever been. And not only was my stay in Israel voluntary, it was temporary. I knew that I would be going home. But the experience did offer me some measure of insight into the temptations we all share to take advantage of people who are at a disadvantage. And it is against such temptations that the command to love the immigrant warns.

Another verse makes the prohibition against wronging immigrants even more explicit: *You must not pervert justice due to the immigrant* (Deut. 24:17). In other words, the rights of immigrants must not be withheld, and their access to a legal defense must not be denied. It is all too easy to hold back the wages of immigrant workers or to cheat them by inflating prices. And it is all too common for perpetrators to escape censure or punishment: human laws and institutions of justice are rarely designed to protect everyone equally. Far too frequently they protect the interests of the strong while failing to take notice of the plight of the weak. For that reason the Torah went out of its way to include immigrants commandment granting rest to workers on the Sabbath (Exod. 23:12), and it awarded special protections to immigrants, allowing them to benefit from the laws pertaining to gleanings (Lev. 19:10), the unharvested corners of the field (Lev. 23:22), and the forgotten sheaf (Deut. 24:19), which were to be left for Israel's poor.

The love for the immigrant envisioned in the Other Greatest Commandment, therefore, is more than sentimentality. The Other Greatest Commandment requires taking active measures to set the immigrant on an equal footing with the members of his or her host community.



## But Why Should We Love The Immigrant?

The Torah offers two main reasons why the Children of Israel ought to love the immigrant, both of which appear in the context of the Other Greatest Commandment: *When an immigrant lives with you in your land, do not do him wrong. The immigrant living among you must be to you like the native born, and you must love him like yourself, for you were immigrants in the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God (Lev. 19:33-34).* The most obvious reason, then, for God's demand that Israel love the immigrants who took up residence among them, was that Israel had shared the experience of immigration. As immigrants in Egypt the Children of Israel had been mistreated, slandered, unjustly suspected, and finally enslaved. Having been redeemed, the Children of Israel were not to permit others to receive the same treatment at their hands. As another verse states, *You must not oppress the immigrant, for you know the immigrant's soul, since you were immigrants in the land of Egypt (Exod. 23:9).* Thus, God required Israel to love immigrants on account of Israel's unique history.

But if the Children of Israel have a special obligation toward immigrants on account of their history, what about followers of Jesus of non-Jewish extraction? Does our history let us off the hook? Not at all. We Gentile followers of Jesus have our own unique history of exclusion and outsider status. Recall the words of Paul in the Epistle to the Romans: *To Israel belong the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the lawgiving, and the worship and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from them came the Messiah (Rom. 9:4-5).* But the status of Gentile followers of Jesus is quite



The mark of Robert Estienne, a 16th century publisher. The Latin inscription reads, *Noli*

different. As we read in Ephesians, *Remember that you were separated from the Messiah, excluded from citizenship in Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world* (Eph. 2:12). In other words, we non-Jewish believers are immigrants. We are immigrants in a kingdom which is far deeper, more ancient, more enduring, and of greater consequence than any country on earth with borders drawn on maps with human hands.

*altum sapere* ("Be not high-minded [but fear]"; Rom. 11:20). Image courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Since we are immigrants in the eternal Kingdom it behooves us to befriend and assist our sister and brother immigrants in what ever temporal dominions we happen to be living at the present time. We who are immigrants in the eternal Kingdom cannot listen to reports about raids with complacency, or talk about deportations with anything but abhorrence, or dismiss plans for amnesty with scorn.<sup>[5]</sup> Our citizenship in the eternal Kingdom depends very much on how we treat the non-citizens in the temporal countries where we now live.

If who we are is the more obvious reason why we ought to love immigrants, the less obvious reason is who God is: *And you must love him [i.e., the immigrant] like yourself...I am the LORD your God* (Lev. 19:34). And who is the LORD? *The LORD, the LORD, the merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in loyalty and faithfulness* [Exod. 34:6]. *He who fashions mountains and creates wind, and who tells human beings their secret thoughts, who makes the dawn dark and who treads on the high places of the earth, the LORD God of Hosts is his name* [Amos 4:13]. *And who may abide the day of his coming? Or who can stand when he appears?* [Mal. 3:1] That is who he is. He is the one who created the land on which our houses sit, and upon which our cities are built, and upon which our countries are established. All the earth is his. What right have we, who depend upon his benevolence, to claim a territory as our own, or to patrol its borders, denying

entry to those we deem to be unworthy? *The land is mine*, the LORD declared to the Children of Israel. *You are immigrants and guests with me* [Lev. 25:23].

If the sons and daughters of Israel were no more than immigrants and guests in the land God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, how much more are the rest of us immigrants and guests in the lands where we now live, seeing as they were not promised to us? The fact is, the earth is not ours, it is his. We live where we do by grace, not by right, and we presume upon that grace to our peril when we deny refugees safe passage across our borders, or when we deport back across our borders immigrants who have sought refuge in our communities. How foolish are we to think that we own the land on which our little dominions are built! *The earth is the LORD's and all its fullness, the world and all who dwell within it* [Ps. 24:1]. Failure to love the immigrant is nothing less than denying the rights of our God and our Creator, our Redeemer and our King.

## **The Other Greatest Commandment**

The Other Greatest Commandment sounds a prophetic call to reframe the terms of the immigration debate. The borders of our countries are not permanent, nor are they sacred. The lands on which our countries are founded are not our own. Immigrants are not strangers, they are soul mates. We ourselves are immigrants on earth and in the eternal Kingdom.

*Cursed is the one who perverts justice due to the immigrant* (Deut. 27:19).

*Blessed is the one whose help is the God of Jacob,  
whose hope is on the LORD his God,  
who made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them,  
who guards the truth forever;*

*who does justice for the oppressed;  
who gives bread to the hungry;  
the LORD releaser of prisoners;  
the LORD opener of the eyes of the blind;  
the LORD straightener of the bowed down;  
the LORD lover of the righteous;  
the LORD guard of immigrants.  
The fatherless and the widow he upholds,  
but he frustrates the way of the wicked.  
The LORD will reign forever,  
your God, O Zion, from generation to generation.  
Praise the LORD. (Ps. 146:5-10)*



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## Notes

**[1]** See Matt. 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31.

**[2]** In post-Biblical Hebrew the meaning of גַּל changed to “proselyte” or “convert” to the Jewish religion. See Emanuel Tov, “The Septuagint,” in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. Martin Jan Mulder; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 161-188, esp. 175; Jan Joosten, *People and Land in the Holiness Code: An Exegetical Study of the Ideational*

*Framework of the Law in Leviticus 17-26* (Leiden: Brill, 1996),54-73.

**[3]** See Gen. 23:4.

**[4]** The command to love your neighbor like yourself in Lev. 19:18 can likewise be interpreted as “love your neighbor, as you would wish to be loved,” as well as “love your neighbor, who is, after all, just like you.” Both senses of “like yourself” appear to be active in Jesus’ teaching. For a discussion of these two senses of the commandment to love one’s neighbor, see Joshua N. Tilton, [\*Jesus’ Gospel: Searching for the Core of Jesus’ Message\*](#) (JerusalemPerspective.com, 2012), Chapter 10: The Way of the Kingdom: Love.

**[5]** On the place of amnesty within the early Christian message, see Joshua N. Tilton, “[Amnesty or Amnesia? A Christian Dilemma in the United States of America.](#)”