

Martin Luther King Day Text Study

Shemot 22:20

20 You shall not aggrieve a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

וגר לא-תונה ולא תלחצנו כִּי-גרים הייתם בארץ מצרים

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "Healing the Heart of Darkness"

Those who forget what it feels like to be a stranger, eventually come to oppress strangers, and if the children of Abraham oppress strangers, why did I make them My covenantal partners? Empathy, sympathy, knowledge and rationality are usually enough to let us live at peace with others. But not in hard times. Serbs, Croats and Muslims lived peaceably together in Bosnia for years. So did Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda. The problem arises at times of change and disruption when people are anxious and afraid. That is why exceptional defenses are necessary, which is why the Torah speaks of memory and history - things that go to the very heart of our identity. We have to remember that we were once on the other side of the equation. We were once strangers: the oppressed, the victims. Remembering the Jewish past forces us to undergo role reversal. In the midst of freedom we have to remind ourselves of what it feels like to be a slave.