

# POSITION IMPOSITIONS

*by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky*

How would you feel? That is a question asked by a wide-ranging group of inquisitors ranging from kindergarten teachers chiding their immature charges, to philosophy professors lecturing to disciples about the worlds of the theoretical. Its validity sets the tone from issues that vary from the golden rule to admonitions at the supper table. And at first glance it seems that the Torah uses the maxim to mitigate a deficiency in our very own human nature.

"Do not taunt or oppress a ger (newcomer) because you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:20). According to most commentators, the verse refers to the ger -- a convert to Judaism. Others comment however, that it also applies to any newcomer, be it to a neighborhood, a synagogue, or a school. Rashi explains that the Torah forewarns the Jewish nation from being cocky toward anyone who would join our people. "After all," Rashi expounds, "the stranger can easily remind us of our since-forgotten experience in Egypt, where we, too, were strangers."

However, something bothers me. The Torah's set of values is pure and unmitigated by personal partiality. So let us ask. Does it truly matter that we were once strangers? Is not it inherently wrong to taunt a newcomer? Shouldn't the Torah just say, "Do not taunt a newcomer? It is morally wrong!" Why is there even a mention of our Egyptian experience? Had we gone directly from Jacob's home to a settled life in the land of Israel, would we then be allowed to taunt newcomers? Of course not! Our years of servitude should not influence the morality of taunting others! So why does the Torah consider our bad experience a factor?

Dr. Norman Blumenthal has published extensively about the unique experience of Holocaust survivors' children. Without revealing actual details, he related a case history of a young man whose father had escaped from a Nazi concentration camp at the age of 16 years old. The fugitive did not hide in the forest or in a barn, rather he joined a group of gentile partisans. For the duration of the war, he lived with them, ate with them, and killed Nazis with them. Still, the courageous young man never gave up his convictions and feelings of Judaism.

On that day his father, by then a very successful executive who was very active in the American Jewish community, turned to him and said. "Son, now the easy life is over. Just like me, now you must learn what it takes to survive amongst the gentiles!" He sent the young teen to a university in the southern part of the United States where Jews were as rare as snow. Within months, the young man, mercilessly taunted in a foreign environment, suffered a nervous breakdown. It took years of therapy to undo the shambles.

Perhaps we can understand the posuk in a new homiletic light. The sages declare that our experience in Egypt was very necessary, albeit uncomfortable, one to say the least. Under the duress of affliction we fortified our faith. Under the pressure of ridicule we cemented our resolve. Under the strain of duress we built families and sustained our identity. And perhaps it was that experience that laid the ability to endure far-reaching suffering, tests of faith that were only surpassed by the tests of time.

And now enter the convert John Doe who hails from a corporate office in West Virginia and has made a conscious, comfortable decision to join the ranks of Moses' men. Our first reaction may just be to have him bear the test of the Jew. Like bootcamp in Fort Bragg, or beasting at West Point, we may have the urge even a compulsion to put Mr. Doe through the rigors of our oppression. After all, that is the stuff of which we are made. We may want to taunt and tease because "we were slaves in a foreign land." The Torah tells us not to do so. "Do not taunt or oppress a ger (newcomer) because you were strangers in a he land of Egypt." Do not impose your difficult experiences in life on others that are newcomers to your present situation. It is easy to say, "such men are made from sterner stuff" and proceed to harangue those who would join us. That should not be.

Life has a personal trainer for every individual, and each soul has a particular program mapped out by the Almighty. Jews from birth may have had to suffer in Egypt, while converts have other issues to deal with. One's particular experience may not be fodder for the next person. Do not use your encounters as the standard for the entire world. One cannot view the world from the rear view mirror of his personal experience.

Good Shabbos

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*Dedicted by Marcia Raicus in loving memory of her parents Eugene Raicus, M.D. Yehoshua ben Moshe Suzanne Raicus -- Tzeitel bas Moshe*

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