Living Humbly with Whose We Are  
Strangers on Holy Ground Bible Study Webinar Series  
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Few religious liberals I know spend much time with of three-fifths of the Torah. That's too bad, because there's a lot of really amazing wisdom in these books. Part of it is because although stories are woven in and around Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Numbers, there's lot of naming specifics of how to live, and sometimes it seems really far away from the issues most of us face. Part of it comes from disagreement with some of the specifics and what they seem to imply, such as including a ritual of forgiveness and reconciliation for man who sexually assaults an enslaved woman (Leviticus 19:20-22). I've survived multiple sexual assaults and surviving one doesn't make it any easier the next time. Sexual violence attacks us at the core of who we are, and corrodes our loving connections, alienating us from being wholly part of the community. Sexual violence is now understood as violating human rights, although it is apparent we don't all understand and appreciate how damaging sexual violence can be, as places like Kansas City decriminalize domestic violence. I believe that sexual assault and slavery are wrong and if there is merciful justice, there need to be ways of accountability, restoration, and reconciliation. I know we're not supposed to bear grudges (Leviticus 19:18), so I'll also argue that for restoration of community, it requires us to do so work around healing for the sexually abused and ending slavery.

That so much of the Torah deals with so many obligations is a reminder to us: when we’re feeling absolutely sure we know what’s ethical and how to live well, perhaps we want to pause for a moment and find our humility we’ve set aside. Living humbly with God well is complicated, and we have to do that living with what we meet each day. I can find a number of requirements I do not appreciate or understand or that feel really bound to a particular place and time to me. Yet I have neighbors who seek to live every single one of those obligations, with great care and great love. That’s where we come together: that God calls us to live in humility, mercy, love, and reverence, caring for one another and this earth. Living humbly with God requires us to live humbly with one another and this planet (Deut. 10:12-14).

We are obliged to remember we were once aliens and strangers (perhaps even still are!). Rabbi Jill Jacobs, in Where Justice Dwells: A Hands-On Guide to Doing Social Justice in Your Jewish Community (2011) tells us that our obligation of memory means two different actions (p. 6). We are called to lirot et atzmo – seeing ourselves as part of – and to l’harot et atzmo – showing we are part of those who are suffering oppression, marginalization, and alienation. Liberation theology, working from a different tradition’s perspective, speaks of incarnational practices of being one with those who are oppression, marginalized, and
alienated, which, for people who are privileged not to have those experiences, begins with choosing to empathize, to reconnect our hearts to those suffering. In this obligation to memory, we answer the question, “whose are we?” We belong to God. We belong to one another, including every stranger and when we find ourselves once again strangers. We belong to the land.

If a practice is good for ourselves, it needs to also be good for our neighbor. And who is our neighbor? Our neighbor is everyone who isn't already our kin, every stranger, every alien, every one suffering from bondage, every one. In a multicultural world, this is a common place for us to develop misunderstandings, a common place where we struggle for analogies that might lead us to a merciful justice and lovingkindness. Living humbly with God isn’t easy; it isn’t even always obvious what we need to do. Fortunately, we have a great many stories and other texts that recall us in shared humility to the shared difficult path of tending whose we are.

**Study:**
Leviticus 19-20 (esp: 19:33-34 & 20:24-26)  
Deuteronomy 6, 10:14-11:7  
Exodus 20:8-11  
Exodus 23: 1-13

Matthew 25:34-46

**Summary Question:** What does it mean to remember we once were strangers? Why is honoring God connected with caring for aliens?

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