There’s an old joke based on the three appearances of the commandment “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk”—the first being in this week’s parashah, Mishpatim (Exod. 23:19). The narrow prohibition against “eating the flesh of an animal together with the milk that was meant to sustain it” (Etz Hayim, 474) was expanded over time into a vast array of laws regarding the separation of all dairy and all meat:

Moses replies: Oh, you mean we should wait three to six hours between eating meat and dairy?
God says: You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk (Exod. 34:26). Moses replies: Oh, you mean we should have two separate sets of dishes for meat and dairy, separate pots and pans and utensils, and separate sponges?
God says: Fine, have it your way.

The joke allows us to laugh at our tendency toward legal obsessiveness and stringencies, and also subtly celebrates our interpretive creativity in transforming one short verse into tomes of law that impact our homes, wallets, and interpersonal behavior in drastic ways. But, in highlighting our particularly Jewish way of dealing with textual repetition, it also brings to light a stark contrast between how we have responded to this repeated commandment and to another one in our parashah.

In the previous chapter, the Torah instructs us, “You shall not wrong a stranger in your midst or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exod. 22:21). It continues, “You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan” (v. 21), and then enjoins us to take particular care when engaging in business dealings with the poor, given their financial precariousness (vv. 24-26). Taken together, this series of exhortations makes clear that we must take care of the most vulnerable individuals in our society—the marginal, the insecure, those who lack safety nets to fall back on in hard times. The Talmud notes that the prohibition against oppressing a stranger is repeated at least 36 times in the Bible, illustrating the lawgiver’s concern for the downtrodden. In contrast, the commandment against boiling a kid in its mother’s milk, though repeated three times, has been expanded into an extensive body of law that permeates every aspect of Jewish life.

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sister, working three jobs and sleeping only on the subway rides in between until she was, many years later, able to start her own business in the garment industry. My work on this project is in her memory and, even more so, in memory of the many who never made it here—those whose refugee journeys ended very differently. Earlier in the parashah, there is a now-defunct law harkening back to a time when Israelites owned slaves (Exod. 21:20-21). “When a man strikes his slave... if he survives a day or two, he is not to be avenged, since he is the other’s property” (his delayed death reveals that the master intended to punish, not kill, him). The law is understood to refer to a non-Israelite slave, based on the phrase “he is the other’s property”—for an Israelite slave (or, more accurately, indentured servant) would not be considered the property of another Israelite (Mekhilta). This is obviously not in keeping with our universally anti-slavery values. And yet, it has something to teach us, for the Torah reveals a telling...of origin, or way of life—as being fully human. We limit our empathy for them. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in a piece that helped magnify the urgency of the refugee crisis in the Jewish community, wrote:

I used to think that the most important line in the Bible was “Love your neighbour as yourself”. Then I realised that it is easy to love your neighbour because he or she is usually quite like yourself. What is hard is to love the stranger, one whose colour, culture or creed is different from yours. That is why the command, “Love the stranger because you were once strangers”, resonates so often throughout the Bible. It is summoning us now. (“Refugee crisis: ‘Love the stranger because you were once strangers’ calls us now”, The Guardian, 6 September, 2015)

The laws of kashrut do come up in the context of our work with our refugee family. In keeping with the spirit of hospitality that is core to their culture, they serve us delicious food with every visit, and we have had to respectfully remind them that we can’t eat their meat. Their religion also includes strictures related to meat, and it has been challenging for them to understand that our laws are not the same. But what we really share with this family—far beyond parallel sets of dietary laws—is that we are all part of a global, multi-generational chain of people who care for strangers. And if this core religious obligation isn’t occupying at least 12 times more of our time and energy than the separation between meat and dairy is, then perhaps we are misunderstanding what the Torah is trying to teach us about how the mitzvot—and which mitzvot in particular—should shape the contours of our Jewish lives.

We have explained to the family, devout adherents of a different religion, that we are doing this as Jews, on two levels. The first is the mitzvah that obligates us. The second is our personal histories and our history as a people, which bring home for us the life-or-death stakes of that obligation. Every story the family tells us of their own narrow escapes from danger, their own confusions about American life, their own frustrations about not speaking English fluently or not being able to support themselves yet, resonates with our own family stories. My great-grandmother fled Russia and came here alone at the age of 12, solely responsible for her younger...