

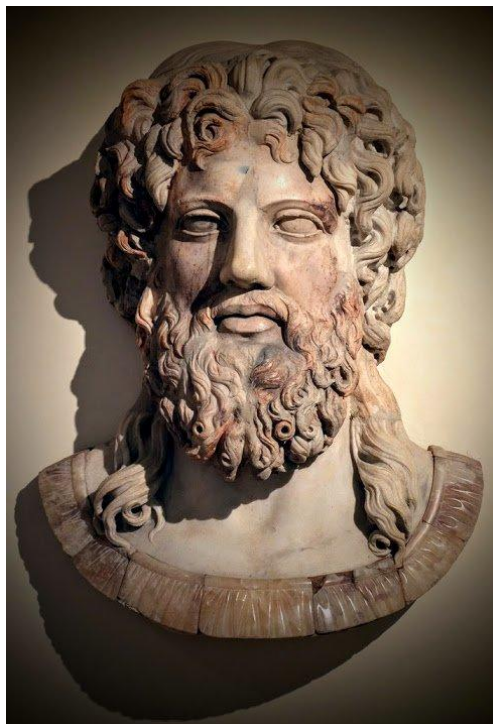
The Stranger at the Gate

How we wrestle with two ancient worldviews informing how we approach our neighbors
Jordan Michels

How should we treat others? We have wrestled with the question of how we hold the other, and how we behave toward the stranger, for over three thousand years. Two ancient worldviews — the Greek and the Hebraic — have battled for dominance in our brains and cultures. Many of our current personal and political divides are simply a reflection of this unresolved struggle.

Let us begin in ancient Greece—a fragmented land of isolated valleys and scarce resources. If you saw a stranger walking down the road toward your home, your hand instinctively moved to the hilt of your sword. To prevent this world from dissolving into constant bloodshed, the Greeks evolved an incredible social technology called *xenia*—sacred hospitality. Christopher Nolan famously dramatizes this as the "law of Zeus" in his new *Odyssey* movie. Because there were no local police to enforce it, this system relied on a profound psychological pillar: fear.

The Greeks looked outward at visitors with anxious hearts. Through *theoxenia*, they believed a god could be walking the earth in the rags of a beggar just to test your virtue. Zeus *Xenios* was the divine avenger of slighted travelers. Consequently, hosts followed a strict, protective protocol: welcoming, washing, feeding, and gifting the traveler before ever daring to ask their name. Guests, too, were bound to leave weapons at the door and avoid becoming a threat. It was a beautiful but high-stakes transaction. You checked the boxes of etiquette because a single slip could bring a lightning bolt to obliterate your household.



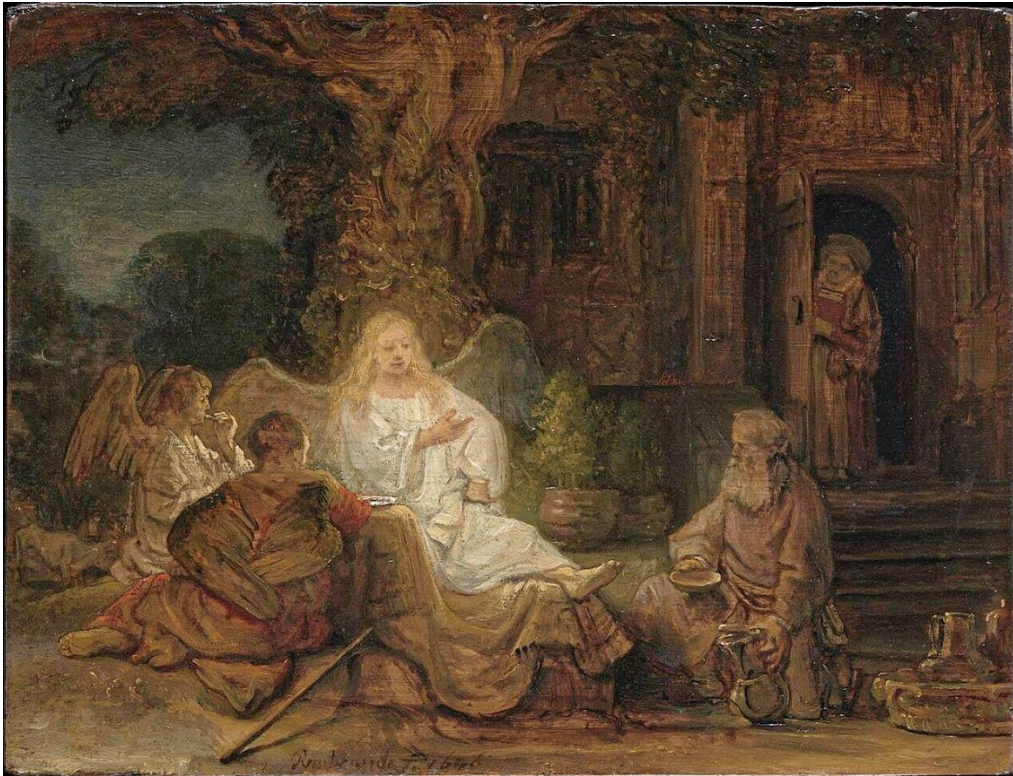
We see the tragic limit of this fear-based worldview at the gates of Troy. The Trojan War began because Paris broke *xenia* by stealing Helen from his host, Menelaus. After ten years of bloody stalemate, Odysseus devised a plan that weaponized this very law. In a great violation of Zeus's law, the Greeks built a massive wooden horse and left it as a sacred parting gift. The Trojans were skeptical, but trapped by Zeus's Law, they dragged the horse inside — and Troy was sacked.



The Procession of the Trojan Horse Into Troy, Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo

The aftermath unfolded like inevitable karma. The Greek ships were eventually destroyed, their men killed, and it took Odysseus ten tortuous years to return home. The *Odyssey* depicts a world, of cause and effect, of endless retribution and vengeance. Throughout it all, there is no remorse or forgiveness—only humans tossed by the storms of vengeful gods. It is only when Athena finally takes pity that the cycle of violence breaks. Even then, Odysseus's rage doesn't end until Zeus throws down a final, terminating thunderbolt.

Across the Mediterranean Sea another worldview unfolds. An elderly patriarch named Abraham sits at the opening of his tent in the desert heat. He spots three wanderers approaching and runs out into the suffocating sun to welcome them. He bows, washes their feet, and commands Sarah to bake fresh bread while he prepares a choice calf, fine cheese, and milk. In return the strangers offer Abraham valuable information about his future.



Abraham Serving the Angels, Rembrandt van Rijn

Abraham is a wealthy, powerful chieftain; he has no logical reason to lower himself to serve weary travelers. He does it because he looks at the dusty, tired faces of those strangers and recognizes something sacred.

Both the Greek and Hebraic traditions teach that welcoming the stranger is a sacred duty. But underneath the surface similarity lies a massive divide: Greek *xenia* is driven by fear, while the Hebraic worldview introduces a radical idea. Every single human being is inherently created in the image of God. The stranger does not need to be a god in disguise playing a trick on you; the stranger is already a reflection of the divine just by virtue of being alive.

The Greeks are terrified of divine retribution if they do not properly treat the stranger. Abraham is excited by the possibilities that visitors may offer. In his case the strangers confirm an earlier promise: they tell him that Sarah, long past childbearing years, will soon bear the son through whom Abraham's prophesied destiny—father of a great nation—will finally begin to unfold. Further in their conversation about saving the city of Sodom if it contains any good people, a new relationship with the divine is forged where humans negotiate with God, thus allowing the bond to evolve over time and we become full co-creators of our reality.

This spiritual revolution is codified in Leviticus, which instructs us to "be holy for I am holy." It transforms collective historical trauma into a mandate for universal empathy, explicitly commanding love for the outsider because "you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Centuries later, Rabbi Hillel summarized this entire revolution while standing on one foot. When challenged by a skeptic to explain the whole Torah in a single moment, he replied: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is the entire Torah, the rest is commentary; go and study it."



Rabbi Hanan Sills – Torah on One Foot, A.I.

Truth is not a static formula; it is alive and deeply contextual. Only when we listen to the situation can we ask the still, small voice within: What good is trying to unfold? This is why Hillel directs us to "go and study."

The truth of this moment and its possibilities are only revealed upon reflection, introspection, inquiry, openness, and revelation. The Golden Rule breaks the eternal cycle of retribution. Hillel is asking for far more than good manners—he asks us to become co-creators of a new potential.

Leviticus, Hillel and Jesus use the word Ahava in describing how we should act toward the other. It is often translated as love. But it is not the emotional or romantic feeling we often mean when we use the word love today. Ahava is better understood as a deep empathy, experiencing the world as though you were that person with his or her challenges and history. It is not a passive feeling but a conscious action—"and you shall love." It is impossible to really know someone else's heart. By definition, it is an act of imagination. It is this quality that gives us the ability to bargain with the divine.

Notice how Hillel frames the golden rule in the negative. "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor." This negative framing is not an accident. It forces us to examine whether our actions might be hurtful before acting, rather than just assuming our good intentions are pure. Our imagination and the pain in our own hearts becomes the metric for how we treat others.

It is tempting to feel self-congratulatory as Jews, or as other spiritual descendants of Abraham — but for most of us, the golden rule is more of an aspiration than a reality. When modern anxieties spike, our hearts retreat from Abraham's open tent. We run straight back into the defensive fortress of xenia. Self-reflection vanishes. We default to binary thinking: friend or enemy, loyal or traitor.

In a psychobiological sense, fear is the emotion of the reptilian brain. It only offers three choices: fight, flight, or freeze. It is our survival mode. Xenia doesn't remove the fear; it just makes the fear predictable.

In Homer's myths, the Cyclops has no such ritual to hold his fear in check, and he is blind to the humanity of others besides. He sees the visitors as raw material to consume. It's fitting that the myth makes this blindness literal: Polyphemus loses his one eye at the very moment his cruelty is finally answered. But the deeper warning of the myth is far worse. When we switch off our internal empathy, we become the monsters, capable of unlimited cruelty without a bit of guilt.

Are we all Odysseus now? We all carry raw vulnerabilities. We all have old wounds that leave us fiercely defensive. Every person in this room knows the sting of being targeted, bullied, or violated. We may carry stories of victimization in our families, our religious heritage, our nationality, and our race. These wounds are an inevitable part of the human condition. But how we respond remains a choice.

On these days of awe, we must look closely at the walls of our own fortresses. When the world strikes at our vulnerabilities, does our anger freeze into hatred? Are we willing to weaponize incomplete information, or even deceive others, just to manipulate the narrative to look better? Do we hide in denial to avoid conflict, or quietly plot how to get revenge? Or do we try to escape reality altogether, withdrawing like Odysseus onto Calypso's island, trading pain for illusion?

This personal blindness mirrors our broken political landscape. Modern politics deals in power. It demands absolute loyalty. We feel violated when our leaders lie to us, and they do. Yet Rosh Hashanah demands that we ask the harder question: Have you ever used whatever small power you possess to oppress, dismiss, or diminish someone else? In our modern lives, voting is an expression of personal power.

Hillel's rule offers a radical third possibility: getting out of survival mode by activating the creativity and imagination of our higher brain centers and heart. It invites us to drop our weapons. It commands us to step away from the fortress walls and look into the mirror. This is the brave, quiet, terrifying work of Teshuvah. It is the recognition that the person across the ideological divide carries the exact same capacity for pain, hope, and dignity that we do.

True holiness requires us to replace fury with deep, rigorous curiosity. We must choose a path of internal self-reflection to keep our souls whole. Every expression of our power—whether it is an encounter with an unhoused person or how we fill out a ballot—must build a community that rejects performative tribalism. Only then can we choose leaders who articulate realistic pathways to peace, and who possess the vision to build a human story rooted in genuine connection.

In these days of Awe, our tradition asks us to reflect upon who we are and who we wish to be. How do we meet the other when it feels they are a threat. This year, let us step out of the fortress. Let us leave the island. Let us open the tent.