"Because You Were Also Strangers"

Thought for the Day
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I'm just back from Jerusalem, where balancing "on the one hand" with "on the other" can make you dizzy!

On the good hand, a family friend celebrated her bat mitzvah, her religious coming of age, with a short talk about last week's reading from the Torah, part of Moses's farewell address to the Jewish people before he dies. She spoke about the Torah's description of the Promised Land as "a good land, … a land of wheat and barley, of vines and figs and pomegranates; a land of olives and honey; a land where you will eat without shortage, where you will not lack anything."

The rabbi, however, based his hard-hitting sermon on the very next passage, where Moses reminds the people of many of the ethical and religious laws that form the backbone of Judaism, and links the ban on worshipping idols to a warning against the arrogance of saying "It is my own strength and the power of my hand that have achieved all this success." The connection is that both involve the same conceit – just as idol worshippers elevate the work of their own hands into gods, so the arrogant make their own misguided obsessions into a religion; both are glorifying something of their own making as sacred, whether an idea or a piece of stone or metal.

But in fact religion provides no excuse either for the extremist who attacked a Gay Pride parade in Jerusalem or for the self-styled nationalists who torched an Arab house. There is no "on the other hand", and whatever they pretend, their murderous obsessions are a form of idolatry, as much as those of the Taliban or ISIS.

The same section of Deuteronomy provides an antidote to this self-righteous arrogance, teaching us to seek justice for the deprived and to provide for the needs of strangers, "because you were also strangers" – something those struggling to solve the international migrant crisis might also bear in mind.