



Table Talk Parshat Mishpatim

After all of the build up to receiving the Torah, we finally learn the laws themselves in this week's Parsha. The mitzvot that we are first introduced to center around the most vulnerable in our community, the widow, the slave and the stranger.

שמות כ"ג:ט' Exodus 23:9

וְגֵר לֹא תִלְחָץ וְאַתָּם יָדַעְתֶּם אֶת-גִּפְשׁ הָגֵר
כִּי-גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.

"If there is one command above all others that speaks of the power and significance of empathy it is the line in this week's parsha: "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of a stranger: You were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Ex. 23:9)...Why this command? The need for empathy surely extends way beyond strangers. It applies to marriage partners, parents and children, neighbours, colleagues at work and so on. Empathy is essential to human interaction generally. Why then invoke it specifically about strangers? The answer is that "empathy is strongest in groups where people identify with each other: family, friends, clubs, gangs, religions or races." The corollary to this is that the stronger the bond within the group, the sharper the suspicion and fear of those outside the group. It is easy to "love your neighbour as yourself." It is very hard indeed to love, or even feel empathy for, a stranger. Fear of the one-not-like-us is capable of disabling the empathy response. That is why this specific command is so life-changing. Not only does it tell us to empathise with the stranger because you know what it feels like to be in his or her place. It even hints that this was part of the purpose of the Israelites' exile in Egypt in the first place. It is as if God had said, your sufferings have taught you something of immense importance. You have been oppressed; therefore come to the rescue of the oppressed, whoever they are. You have suffered; therefore you shall become the people who are there to offer help when others are suffering."

-The Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Let's Talk!

How does being different from someone make it harder to have empathy for them?

How should the experience of our people in Egypt change our view of strangers?

Is there someone in your life who is different from you that you could connect with better?

What can we learn from people who are different from us?

Why do you think people - adults and children - like to form groups? How can this limit people?



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