

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

treat the weak and the sojourner among us with care, with compassion. Not to oppress him, not to shame her, not to take advantage.

Think again.

In our Parasha are two of well over 30 times that the Torah warns us against mistreating the sojourner (Exodus 22:20, 23:9). Is our collective experience as down-trotted sojourners-slaves in Egypt not enough to create compassion? The Torah did not trust that. Is the memory of the suffering you experienced... in and of itself sufficient to awake love and compassion...? Have we not seen that the human heart – twisted as it is – works also the other way! ...Sometimes, the fact that you were in your youth a sojourner, oppressed, will push you to find an outlet for your soul by oppressing a fellow person who is now under your jurisdiction. (Nechama Leibowitz on Parashat Mishpatim.)

It is not accidental that the Torah groups the Ger, the sojourner, with other weak parties in the society such as the poor, the widow and the orphan, as seen in our Parasha (22:20-23). They may be the ones most in need of the protection by the 'system,' but are the least likely to receive it. Our treatment of these groups is the health test of our society, at any time in history.

Our prophets judged their societies by their attitude and treatment of these weak segments. Jeremiah, standing by the gates of the Mikdash (temple) in Jerusalem sounds a dire warning of the impending destruction of God's house because of the people's deeds (Jeremiah 7). His suggestion for remedy? Do justice, do not rob or afflict the sojourner, the orphan and the widow. God's house cannot stand on corrupt human foundations. Jeremiah was not listened to, if to judge by history. Exodus 22:20-23 warns against the afflictions of these very groups, threatening consequences. If they cry out? God will hear them, just like He heard our cry from the depth of the Egyptian affliction (2:23-25). Then 'My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children orphans.' None of us are guaranteed our social position. Jeremiah's warning, unbelievable as it was to his generation, came true all too soon.

Where are we today? Our world has many who became sojourners out of need and danger. Let us not forget that we, too, have been sojourners in our lands of Egypt. Do not oppress the sojourner.

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Mishpatim

Shabbat Shekalim

Shabbat Mevarekhim Hahodesh

February 10, 2018 | 25 Shevat 5778

Annual | Exodus 21:1-24:18 (Etz Hayim p. 456-480; Hertz p. 306-322)

Triennial | Exodus 22:4-23:19 (Etz Hayim p. 465-474; Hertz p. 311-318)

Maftir | Exodus 30:11-16 (Exodus 30:11-16; Etz Hayim p. 523-524; Hertz p. 352-352)

Haftarah | 2 Kings 12:1-17 (Etz Hayim p. 1276-1279 Hertz p. 992-995)

Don't Oppress The Sojourner - We Have Been There

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Do we remember? The feeling of being the outsider, the ones with no right to complain when we are harassed? The fear of upsetting those who hold our fate in their hands? The knowledge that we don't belong in the only home that we know?

We were there. We were in Egypt (and through history – in many more countries), and we did not belong. Our bowed heads caused alarms, our mere existence was threatening. We might have felt local, but we were sojourners. We looked different, we had our own story. We were strangers. Dangerous by our presence.

'A sojourner you shall not oppress; you know the feelings of the sojourner for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt!' So goes the warning of the Torah. Who knows better than us the shame, the desperation, the impossible attempt to belong, having no other place to go? We are a nation born out of a narrative of bondage and social weakness. We should never need to be commanded to

(Dvar Torah continued on back page...)

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Dvar Haftarah

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

This Shabbat, Shabbat Shekalim, marks the first of four special Shabbatot which precede Pesah. Its purpose was to remind the people to pay the special 'Machatzit Hashekkel – half shekel' tax incumbent on the people to pay for the communal needs of the Temple, both sacrificial and for upkeep purposes. It was paid before Pesach, because Pesach is the first of the 'Shelosh Regalim' – the three pilgrimage festivals and hence was the beginning of the Temple's fiscal year.

The haftarah for this special Shabbat is a bittersweet one. It recounts a period in biblical history where the Davidic monarchy had become corrupt and, consequently, the people's faith in the nation's institutions, including the Temple was at a low ebb. The previous king, Ahaziah, was murdered in a conspiracy. His mother, Athaliah, usurped the throne, murdering all other potential claimants to the throne, except for one, Jehoash, a seven-year-old child, who was protected by the high priest. Amidst all of this intrigue, the Temple fell into disrepair.

Rabbi David Kimche (12th century Provence) describes the situation: "The wicked Athaliah and her sons had broken into [and raided] the Temple of its riches. This made it necessary to rebuild [the Temple and replenish its treasury]. For the Temple was only one hundred and fifty years old and had been built well.... [On this account,] Jehoash [who became king] set about restoring it. This is why it was necessary [for Jehoash] to assemble to holy ones of Israel (the priests), that they should sanctify "Shekalim" for this purpose..."(adapted) This significance of this "sanctification" was that the king wanted to ensure that the money was used for its intended purpose: "The king Jehoash called for Jehoiada the priest and the other priests and said to them: 'Why don't you repair the Temple? Now, no longer should you take the money for yourselves; it should be given over to the restoration of the Temple.'" (2 Kings 12:8) This action restored credibility to the Temple allotments.

It is interesting to note that this reading is incorporated into the liturgical reading to remind people to make their mandatory contributions. It is intended not only that the people have an obligation to give, but also, equally important, that those who are charged with responsibility for the dispersal of funds must make sure that the funds are used with proper "sanctity and integrity".

Table Talk

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

We ended last week with the revelation at Sinai. As part of that, the people received some of the laws of the Torah ("Mishpatim" means 'laws'.) Here is a taste of a few of them (this is in no way a Halachic discussion.)

- 1) The first law concerns a Hebrew slave (21:62-6). How long will he work? At that point, he will leave without compensating. Why might we have thought that there should be compensation involved? Why do you think that the person ended up as a slave? Has that changed by the time he leaves?
- 2) Some more slave laws, this time it is not specified that this is a Hebrew slave: What will happen if a person beats his slave and the slave dies (21:20-21)? What happens if the slave is hurt but shows signs of recovering? What does the law teach us about the attitude (dilemma?) towards slaves?
- 3) If a person steals an ox or a sheep, and has slaughtered or sold it, he will pay 4 times [the value] for the sheep but five for the ox. Why do you think that there is a difference between them? Why do you think these categories were chosen?
- 4) If you meet your enemy's ox or donkey lost on the road, you shall return it to him (23:4). Why do you think that the Torah chose to phrase it this way? What do you think your obligation should be if it is your friend's animal?
- 5) The 3 pilgrimage holidays (Pesach, Shavuot, and Succoth) are mentioned in this Parasha (23:14-19). What is the reason given for the celebration of each of them? Which one seems to be in a separate category from the other two?

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