

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Mishpatim)

This week I am writing to you from a bus somewhere in Poland in the middle of a week with the students of Yeshivat Orayta, seeing what was taken from us in the destruction of European Jewry.

When new prisoners arrived in Auschwitz, if they survived the infamous selections on the train platforms, within an hour they were robbed, stripped, shaved (and had their hair cut), and deloused. Their humiliation had begun. Then they got uniforms and were given numbers, and by the time they were allowed into their barracks to attempt their first night of the sleep of the damned, they barely recognized themselves.

Primo Levi recalls the thought he had that horrible night realizing that had he had access to a mirror, a strange face would have looked back at him; but he could see that stranger's face in the faces all around him....

But some were stranger than others. One of the things that gave some concentration camp inmates a huge advantage increasing their chances of survival, was knowledge of German. Everything in the camps was done by design, and everything happened in German. As in the ghettos, if you could not communicate with your captors, you could not develop a relationship with them making it easier for them to murder and torture the Jews with abandon. This was one of the reasons the Germans brought Lithuanian SS to police and deport the Jews in the Ghettoes of Poland....

In Auschwitz, not knowing German could be a death sentence. Our incredible guide, Rav Yitzchak Rubenstein, explained to us that if a prisoner was given a sentence of lashes he was made to count them off in German and if he made a mistake in the German, they started the count all over again....

So the Jews from Greece and Salonika never stood a chance.

I heard a story once of a Jew named Dovid who arrived in Auschwitz from Hungary. After the horrible experience of three days in a cattle car, suddenly, alone and bewildered after Mengele's infamous selection he found himself amongst a small group of Jews being screamed at by an SS guard. Someone behind him, realizing he had no idea what was wanted of him, simply grabbed him and pulled him along as they began to run.

And at various points during his first week someone whispered the right word to say or the right time to step forward, until he found himself working in a kitchen, which saved his life.

He did not even know who many of these people were realizing only much later how many of them had risked their lives to whisper a word or give a shove at the right time and in the right place....

He would later describe how in all his life he had never felt what it was to be an outsider, a stranger, as he did on that first day in Auschwitz, in a strange place listening to people screaming in a foreign tongue and surrounded by people who barely looked human.....

This week in the portion of **Mishpatim** we read of a powerful Mitzvah:

“Ve’Ger lo toneh’, ve’lo tilche’tzenu, ki Gerim he’yitem be’eretz Mitzrayim.”

“Do not oppress the stranger nor abuse him, for you were strangers once in the land of Egypt.” (Shemot (Exodus) 22: 20).

This is a fascinating mitzvah, but one wonders why we need a special mitzvah not to oppress the stranger? Equally strange, the verse seems to suggest that the reason for this mitzvah is because we were once strangers in a strange land (Egypt). After all, if it is immoral to oppress someone, then it is wrong irrespective of whether we ourselves experienced similar oppression; since when does the Torah need to explain the ethics or imperative of a mitzvah?

Even stranger, this mitzvah seems to repeat itself only a few verses later when the Torah enjoins us (ibid. 23:9) not to oppress the stranger, again, because we were strangers once in Egypt. Interestingly these two verses seem to be the beginning and end of a section (really the first such section in the Torah, immediately after the Torah is given in last week’s portion of Yitro) dealing with social justice which includes not oppressing the widow and the orphan, not taking a bribe, not taking interest on loans and so on. Almost as if this mitzvah is the essence of what Jewish ethics and social justice is all about.

In fact, all of the victims of the Torah’s list of social injustices here are experiencing life as a stranger of one sort or another. The widow, who no longer has her husband at her side now loses that familiar comfort of her spouse by her side, and the orphan no long has his or her parent there to back them inevitably making them feel somewhat estranged from the normal social fabric. And the poor person often feels he does not belong....

Indeed, in Maimonides’ list of eleven mitzvot that form the foundational fabric of Jewish interpersonal ethics in *Hilchot Deot*, the Rambam includes two mitzvot that relate to this topic directly: to love the stranger and not to cause even inadvertent suffering or distress to the miserable, such as widows and orphans.

So why do we seem to place such an emphasis on how we treat strangers?

This week we visited the yeshiva of Rav Meir Shapiro: Yeshivas Chochmei Lublin, where the Daf Yomi (the daily study of one folio of Talmud) was founded. And Rav Yitzchak Blau (my co-Rosh Yeshiva at Orayta) gave a shiur in which he touched upon the topic suggesting there are two major opinions as to the reasoning underlying this mitzvah.

One possibility is that you feel bad for the stranger who is in a weaker position due to his being a stranger to the system. He has less friends, might not know the language, and suffers silently as a result. So the Torah wants us to be sensitive to his pain especially as we once felt this pain. Hence the topic of the stranger, as here in our portion of Mishpatim, is juxtaposed to the mitzvot concerning not mistreating widows and orphans to whose weaker position we are equally sensitive.

One could also posit that we love the stranger because we admire his difficult and even courageous journey as Rav Yitzchak Hutner (in his *Pachad Yitzchak*) suggests. In fact, Maimonides (in *Hilchot Deot*) tells us to love the stranger just as we love Hashem. So obviously, Maimonides views this mitzvah as one of admiration (admiring the stranger) as it would be difficult to view the love of Hashem as loving a less fortunate being!

There is a third approach suggested by the **Ohr HaChaim** (Rav Chaim Ibn Attar) who points out how easy it is to feel superior as Jews having been blessed to receive the Covenant; we are thus enjoined to remember what it felt like to be a stranger all those millennium ago.

Just as we were once mistreated, we should constantly be aware of how easy it is to mistreat others or at least ignore how others are mistreated.

In fact, if you think about it, we have always been strangers to some degree. The first command G-d gives to a Jew is to tell Avraham to leave behind his home and family and everything he holds dear and leave for a foreign destination. Indeed, Avraham becomes known as an Ivri or Hebrew, a name we carry to this day, because as the Midrash suggests the whole world was on one side and he was on the other (me'Ever la'Nahar is the other side of the river ...).

And the Jewish people leaving Egypt and believing in one G-d in a pagan world were also strangers in the world.

And of course, the Germans during the Holocaust tried so hard to turn us back into strangers; they added a Jewish name (Israel or Sarah) to every Jewish identity paper, humiliated us in public squares all over Europe, took away our dignity, changed our clothing to striped uniforms, caused us to be viewed both in the press as well as physically in the camps, as strangers; vermin; a disease to be eradicated.

Which might explain why the Torah puts such an emphasis on loving the stranger, because how we treat the stranger is where injustice begins, and thus is the critical building block in guaranteeing a better world.

Every time a new face walks into shul and we make them feel more welcome, and every time a Syrian in pain is treated in an Israeli hospital we bring another ray of light into the world to help dispel the great darkness that reigned in the world seventy-five years ago....

Shabbat Shalom from somewhere in Poland,

Binny Freedman