

PARSHAT MISHPATIM
FEBRUARY 18, 2012
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

In last week's Torah portion G-d revealed the Ten Commandments to the children of Israel. From on-high G-d presented these ten great eternal truths to the Israelite people.

In this week's Torah portion, Parshat Mishpatim, we deal with earthly things. While the first letter of the Torah reading is a "Vav" suggesting that all of these laws emanate from Sinai, the laws that are present in this week's portion discuss everyday living, family life, business ethics, justice in society, court proceedings and everything that makes for every day human life and human activity. It is a Torah portion which is very down to earth, dealing with the mundane and the details of living a just, ethical and moral life.

In the midst of the legislation there is a verse which tells us: "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." This is one of 36 times that the Torah cautions us concerning proper behavior towards a stranger. Eighteen verses later the Torah reiterates the commandment in these words: "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt."

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin points out: "In a world that was even more chauvinistic than our own, the Torah mandates that the Israelite people love peaceful non-Israelites living among them no less than they love themselves." Humane treatment of all people, including strangers, was just one way in which the law of the Torah differentiated itself from existing law in its neighboring communities. As we recall what it was like to be strangers in the land of Egypt, we are to imagine what it would feel like to be a widow, an orphan, or another marginal member of society. As we recall how we were treated in Egypt, we must now make sure that the treatment of these strangers in our midst be appropriate and proper.

Towards the end of our Torah reading this morning, the children of Israel establish a covenant with G-d and in an elaborate ceremony accept upon themselves the responsibilities of following the laws they received. This concept of covenant has been elaborated throughout the ages in Jewish literature, whether it be biblical, rabbinic, medieval or modern. Rabbi Walter Wurzberger, my family's former Rabbi and a professor at Yeshiva University, writes in his book *Covenantal Imperatives*: "For Judaism, sheer compliance with the law as such was never regarded as the ultimate value. It rather represented a means to the fulfillment of the Divine Will." In other words, Rabbi Wurzberger suggests that simply following the letter of the law is not enough. We should be motivated in our relationship with G-d to go above and beyond the law and to know instinctively what is right and proper to do in every situation. As he writes: "The halakhah does not serve as the final goal of the Jew, but rather as the way, guiding him in his individuality towards authentic personal decisions in the domain of covenantal

imperatives.” Wurzberger wants us to know, in our gut, what is the right thing to do even before we study the law. When we are in a covenantal relationship with G-d, we understand our purpose on earth and embody the meaning of the revelation that was shared with the children of Israel and the Torah which has accompanied us throughout the ages.

Rabbi Elliot Dorff in his book *For the Love of God and People* goes even further by suggesting: “The upshot, then, is that the Jewish covenant with God directly and profoundly affects our relationships with fellow Jews and non-Jews as well as our interactions with God. The soul of the covenant is not only that love and respect for God, but also the love for our fellow human beings as we work together to fix the world.” For Dorff, the covenant is meant to empower us to do what is right and good in this world, for Jew and non-Jew alike. To be in covenant with G-d is also to be in covenant with other human beings and to attempt to create a better world for all.

We live in a world where there are marginal people of various statuses on the corners of society. Whether it be the continuing issues of the orphaned and the widowed as in the ancient past, whether it be the chronic poor of our society or the new poor created by the downturn of the modern economy, there are people who are in need of continual support and assistance. Whether it be the new immigrant in our society attempting to find his place in a culture which is not his or even those who have come illegally to try to find a more secure place to live and a chance to better themselves, our society has those on the margins who must be attended to.

Jewish tradition teaches us that it is not proper to be concerned only for ourselves and our own well-being. The decency of a society is measured by how it cares for its least powerful members. The Israelite was to be especially sensitive to the needs of the strangers in their midst as they had once occupied the same status. You have known, the Torah tells, what it means to live on the margins of society. You have seen how the community at-large rejected you, whether you were slaves in Egypt or new immigrants to the land of Canaan. You must do better, for you know what it is like.

Thus, I encourage you to be involved with Mitzvah Day here at Beth El next week. There are many programs for those who are in need of assistance, whether it be in our own backyard or in other places in our wider community. It is our responsibility to reach out to those in need, to lend them a helping hand and to recognize their plight. As we know, but for the grace of G-d, their plight could be our own.

In the State of Israel this is also a major problem. There are many people from Africa who have sought asylum in Israel. There is an entire underclass, especially in the city of Tel Aviv, who have come to Israel looking for a new future. They have trekked across the African continent, been denied entry into Egypt and have looked to Israel, the ultimate land of immigrants as a safe haven. The Israeli government puts the number of illegal workers in the country at more than 52,000. It is a great problem for Israel, a country with limited resources to be able to deal with all of these new residents. How do we react when the Torah tells us to take care of the stranger in our midst? What should

we do when social welfare services become over-burdened with the problem? These are not simple questions for Israeli society based as it is on Jewish history and culture. There are some who want to live by the letter of the law and others who want to go above and beyond the law. The debates are serious and will decide the fate of many people in the next few months. We, above all, need to recognize our responsibility to those down-trodden in society.

Having just returned from a trip to Berlin, it was recommended that I read a new book by Erik Larson entitled *In the Garden of Beasts: Love, Terror and an American Family in Hitler's Berlin*. The book tells the story of William E. Dodd, a professor at the University of Chicago, who was appointed to be Ambassador to Germany in 1933 by Franklin D. Roosevelt. As Dodd prepares to assume his position he spends time interviewing people, including Jewish leaders, who know what is happening in Germany at that time. While the Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, was energetic in trying to get the administration to do something to make it easier for Jews to gain entry to America, the State Department and most other officials, including FDR, were not as sympathetic. In a memorandum on Russian and Polish immigrants, William J. Carr, an assistant Secretary of State, wrote: "They are filthy, un-American and often dangerous in their habits." Larson informs us that Jewish activists charged that America's consulates abroad had been instructed quietly to grant only a fraction of the visas allowed for each country, a charge that proved to have merit. It seems that informal oral instructions were to limit the number of immigration visas they approved to 10% of the total allowed by each nation's Jewish quota. If the American borders had simply been opened to those who had qualified as part of the quota, just think of how many people would have been saved. Even FDR, himself, stated: "The German authorities are treating the Jews shamefully and the Jews in this country are greatly excited, but this also is not a government affair. We can do nothing except for the American citizens who happen to be made victims."

We know that we were once in the terrible predicament of being on the margins of society and being unwelcome basically any place in the world. Biblical imperatives and covenantal requirements would stipulate that we must learn from these situations and be ready to reach out of those in need of assistance whenever possible. I believe we must be on the liberal side of the immigration debate in this country. I believe we must be sensitive to those who seek asylum in the State of Israel from war torn countries. I believe that our tradition dictates that we, who have suffered perhaps worse than any other people by being unwanted and marginalized, must be ready to help those in need. Yes, we must adhere to laws and the manner in which the society creates them. But they must be just and operative to help those in need.

Enacting the biblical portion of Mishpatim and its laws, stressing the covenantal imperatives of Jewish tradition, and living up to our responsibilities as modern Jews today, impels us to seek justice, ethics and morality in all aspects of our personal lives and communal endeavors. It also stresses upon us to work together with G-d and others who share our values to make this a kinder, more gentle, and more just society for all.