

D'var Torah: Parashat Eikev Kol Shalom, August 24, 2019

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V Ahavtem et ha ger ki gerim hayitem b' eretz mitzrayim

(D'varim-Deuteronomy 10:19)

And you will love the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

In Parashat Eikev we stand on the threshold, ready to enter the land that has been promised. In return, Moses reminds us, we have only to follow the commandments that God had laid down for us, and to love God and because we love God, to love also the stranger. And, even more incredibly, to understand and accept that God loves us.

We should note that this commandment goes beyond the stricture not to harm the stranger that we find in Parashat Mishpatim and elsewhere in the Torah. As the commentary in our Humash notes: "...the Torah cautions us 36 times about the proper behavior toward a stranger...Similarly, as the Israelites were asked to recall what it felt like to be aliens in Egypt...they are asked to imagine what it would feel like to be a widow or an orphan. We are to treat aliens, widows, orphans and other marginal members of society as we would want to be treated in similar circumstances. The decency of a society is measured by how it cares for its least powerful members".¹

The imperative in this parsha, the imperative in the Torah, goes so far beyond what came before, that, in the words of my youth, "it blows my mind." The Babylonians, the Assyrians – all of the ancients understood the need to fear their gods; to stand in awe of their gods; to approach their altars with fear and trembling. But LOVE? The idea that we are in a committed reciprocal relationship with God—that we exist in order to love God and that we are in turn loved by God, was, for its time, unfathomable. In its quiet way, D'varim and Parashat Eikev are perhaps the most radical writings in human history.

In his book *Love: A History*, the philosopher Simon May writes: "If love in the Western world has a founding text, that text is Hebrew. Before Plato and Aristotle...and well before Jesus, Hebrew scripture provides, in two pithy sentences, ideas that have guided the course of love ever since: "You shall love the

¹ *Etz Hayim*, Exodus 22:20, p.468

Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might,” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” May goes on to say: “The widespread belief that the Hebrew Bible is all about vengeance and ‘an eye for an eye’ while the Gospels supposedly invent love as an unconditional and universal value, must therefore count as one of the most extraordinary misunderstandings in all of Western history. For the Hebrew bible is the source not just of the two love commandments, but of a larger moral vision inspired by wonder for love’s power.”²

Love is, or should be, the basis for everything we do as Jews. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said: “Above all, the Torah asks for love...All observance is training in the art of love. To forget that love is the purpose of all mitzvot is to vitiate their meaning.”³

Parashat Eikev instructs us that in order to accept the love of God as the guiding force in our lives, we must “cut away the foreskins of our hearts,” that is excise the hardness, the thickening surrounding our hearts that prevents the light from getting through, the hardness that cripples our ability to grasp what it really means to stand in the shoes of the stranger. This is dangerous territory. It leaves us open and vulnerable to having our hearts broken. Rabbi Menachem Mendel, the Kotzker Rebbe, famously taught that “There is nothing more whole than a broken heart.” The power of his paradox is that if we allow it, our own heartbreak can be our path to compassion. In one of my favorite poems, Mary Oliver ends with these lines:

“I tell you this
to break your heart,
by which I mean only
that it break open and never close again
to the rest of the world.”⁴

A little over a year ago I had the incredible experience of traveling to Los Angeles to attend the first conference of the Jewish Emergent Network, a coalition of seven innovative congregations around the country that have had extraordinary success in attracting “unaffiliated and disengaged” Jews. They don’t represent any one denomination or set of religious practices, but share a commitment to

² Simon May, *Love: A History*, Yale University Press, pp.14, 29-20

³ Abraham Joshua Heschel: *God in Search of Man*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, p.307

⁴ “Lead” by Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems, Volume 2*, Beacon Press

revitalizing Jewish engagement. Each in its own way is redefining the nature of kehillah k'dosha—sacred community. Among those at the conference was a group of early-career rabbis who had just completed the Network's two-year fellowship program before setting out on their own professional path. One memorable late afternoon I sat and listened to these young women and men talk about a personal "God moment." Each story and each moment were as different from one another and as unique as each of these young rabbis. And I was reminded of a God moment of my own, one that like others in my life came on whispered wings without fanfare.

Three years ago, -- our Yom Kippur services at the Rockville Hilton. It had been a long morning, and my daughter, who had been sitting with me, had left for a while, so there was an empty seat next to me. A man came in alone, car keys in hand, ill at ease, wearing a plain kippa but no tallit. He asked if he could take the empty seat, I mumbled "of course" He sat looking straight ahead, making no attempt to open the machzor. As he sat, keys in hand, I felt growing unease. I was one of several hundred Jews sitting in the ballroom of a hotel with an open-entry garage. Although this predated the election of an Administration that is cynically using xenophobia for political gain, there already existed an abundance of post 9/11 warnings to be wary of strangers. Signs on the Metro directed our suspicious attention to those around us; we were told to look for "unusual" behavior, admonished to say something if we saw something. In an attempt to rein in my growing panic, I slowed my breath and became still. As I did I heard, with *astounding clarity*, the words "You were strangers in the land of Egypt." I sat for another moment, aware of the gift I had been given. Then turning, asked my stranger if he'd like me to point out our place in the prayer book; at his response that he didn't read Hebrew, I told him there was English commentary he might find interesting. He responded with a warm smile. A few minutes later Beth and Danny Douek's son Joseph came to tell him: "Dad wants you to sit with us, and to let you know he hasn't spoken yet." With chagrin mixed with relief I realized that my stranger must be a friend of Danny's who had come to hear him deliver what turned out to be a remarkable D'var Torah.

I've thought about what happened many times since. About the ease with which fear can spiral out of control and our inclination to project that fear onto the "other," imagining the harm he can do us. It is easier to do this than to live with what the Existentialists call "the vertigo of existence," the absolute uncertainty of our lives and the fact that, our illusions notwithstanding, we have very little control over events. And how we need to breathe, and to ground ourselves, and to understand that the pain and the glory of being human is learning to live fully

within that uncertainty, to bring meaning to our lives and to our world all the while knowing how tenuous our hold on the future. And to remember our obligation to love, and to know who we are and where we've come from and how we were strangers in Egypt.

In a meditation on Parashat Eikev, the liturgical poet Ruth Brin wrote:

“You who are Lord of all nature,
why do You concern Yourself with humanity?

What is Israel that You should command us
to revere You, to serve You, to love You?

In the days of affliction we call to You,
and from the wastelands of despair we cry to You,

But when you test us with wealth and might
our pride comes near to blotting out our prayer

If we are to serve You with all our might
we must use our power for others

If we are to serve You with mind and heart
we must study and pray

If we are to serve You with all our souls
even the evil inclinations must serve You.

Lord our God though we are unworthy,
You have lifted us up with your inspiration

Though we wither as the grass
You have exalted us with Your commandment
to love you.”⁵

⁵ *Harvest: Collected Poems and Prayers*, Ruth Brin, Holy Cow Press

