

Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Letter of The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital

Parashat Mishpatim
February 25, 2017

פרשת משפטים
כ"ט בשבט תשע"ז

Torah Reading: *Shemot* (Exodus) 21:1-24:18

In this week's *parasha*, Moshe informs the people of numerous ethical and ritual laws and seals the *brit* (covenant) between the *Bnei Yisrael* and Hashem.

One of the numerous laws in the *parasha* states (22:20) “וְגַר לֹא-תוֹנֶה וְלֹא תִלְחָצֶנּוּ כִּי-גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם. – Do not wrong a stranger nor oppress him for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

Hermann Cohen (1842-1919, Germany) explained this verse as follows: “This law of shielding the alien from all wrong is of vital significance in the history of religion. With it alone true religion begins. The alien was to be protected, not because he was a member of one’s family, clan, religious community, or people; but because he was a human being. In the alien, therefore, man discovered the idea of humanity.”

Hermann Cohen was a rational, systematic thinker and a brilliant spokesperson for the Reform movement. Too few American Jews are familiar with his writings because, unfortunately, only two of his works, including his seminal book, *Religion of Reason Out of Sources of Judaism*, have been translated from the original German into English.

Cohen maintained that the Torah was the first statement of ethical monotheism that the world had seen, but it is neither the last nor the best statement of ethical monotheism because this is an ideal that evolves over time. He saw the mission of the Nation of Israel as bringing a vision of ethical monotheism to the world and viewed the modern period as uniquely suited for this, given the Enlightenment and Emancipations that began in the 18th Century. (I sometimes wonder if he would have changed his approach had he lived to see the Holocaust.)

Early on, Cohen believed that the progress of humanity could be represented by two parallel paths: nature/science and morality, both of which make logical sense. He defined morality as laws established to assure ethical behavior. Later in his life, he realized that moral law was cold and dispassionate. We need religion to add the emotional dimension to ethical monotheism and to allow for repentance when we fail, so that we can try again. Cohen also believed that, although multiple religions could develop from reason, the source of all of them is Judaism, and that Judaism is the best among them because it includes love, repentance, and response to suffering, all of which are needed for the progress of ethical monotheism. The Jewish people, according to Cohen, have a mission of spreading the progress of ethical monotheism. We are symbols for humanity because of our suffering and are the example of why moral progress is needed.

Cohen believed in an impersonal God. “Early” Cohen saw God as the force that sustains the world such that humans can move forward in nature/science and morality/religion. God is in the background as a logical support for morality. God has no personality, but is like an engine that makes a car run. “Late” Cohen discovered a love for God because God is the Being who metaphorically forgives you for your sins – that is, your moral failings – so that you can try again.

Cohen rejected out of hand the notion of revelation such as giving the Law at Mount Sinai. By definition, it must be wrong since God is not an entity with a personality who independently can reveal the Divine self to humans. He did not, however, reject the idea of revelation itself. He said that revelation is an evolving process wherein progress is brought to the world and humans become sensitive to

the suffering of others. He saw the Torah as having a kernel of truth in it, given that it was written by people in the 13th Century BCE using their primitive views of the world. The Torah went through changes as the world progressed, but now we have evolved and have surpassed the ideas in the Bible. For example, he regarded creation *ex nihilo* (something from nothing) as a primitive idea, and believed we are too sophisticated to buy into that notion. However, because there are kernels of truth in the Torah, we need to keep looking at it to discern these.

Clearly, Cohen's ideas and theories were far from traditional. They did create the underpinnings for the modern Reform movement, and they give each of us, no matter what our religious leanings, a great deal to think about.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Why does the Torah need to remind us in the *pasuk* (verse) quoted above that we “were strangers in the land of Egypt”?
- What can each person do to assure that he or she maintains the highest level of ethical behavior?
- According to Cohen's philosophy, what is our obligation towards Syrian and other refugees and asylum seekers? What can or should we do to put that philosophy into action?
- How does the Torah fit into what we decide is “right” and “wrong”?