

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Post of Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School of the Nation's Capital

Parashat Mishpatim
February 10, 2018

פרשת משפטים
כ"ה בשבט תשע"ח

Torah Reading: *Shemot* (Exodus) 21:1-24:18
Maftir Reading for *Parashat Shekalim*: *Shemot* 30:11-16

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

In the middle of this *parasha*, we encounter four verses that seem quite relevant and topical to us today. Chapter 22, verses 20-23, tell us:

כ וְגַר לֹא-תוֹנֶה, וְלֹא תִלְחָצְנוּ כִּי-גֵרִים הֵייתֶם, בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם. כֹּא כָל-אֲלֻמְנָה וְיִתּוֹם, לֹא תַעֲנוּן. כב אִם-עֵינָה תַעֲנֶנָּה, אֲתוּ--כִּי אִם-צָעַק יִצְעַק אֵלַי, שָׁמַע אֲשָׁמַע צַעֲקוֹ. כג וְחָרָה אַפִּי, וְהָרַגְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּחֶרֶב; וְהָיוּ נְשֵׁיכֶם אֲלֻמְנוֹת, וּבְנֵיכֶם יִתְמִים.

20 And a stranger you shall not wrong, neither shall you oppress him; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. 21 You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. 22 If you afflict them in any way – for if they cry at all to Me, I will surely hear their cry – 23 My anger shall become hot, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall be widows, and your children, orphans.

A remarkable commentary on these verses appears in the 1960 Soncino Press Chumash, edited by Dr. J.H. Hertz, the chief rabbi of the British Empire:

Stranger. Heb. *Ger*. A resident alien. He was not required to adopt the Jewish Faith, as little as the Israelites, with whose position in Egypt his is compared, were worshippers of Isis or Apis.

You shall not wrong. The rabbis explain this term to mean that nothing must be done to injure or annoy him, or even by word to wound his feelings. The fact that a man is a stranger should in no way justify treatment other than that enjoyed by brethren in race. '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)

For you were strangers. In the next chapter, verse 9, this phrase is preceded by the words, 'for you know the heart of the stranger'; i.e., you know from bitter experience what such a position means, and how it feels to be a stranger. Love of the alien is something unknown in ancient times. The Egyptians frankly hated strangers; and the Greeks coined the infamous term 'barbarian' for all non-Greeks. The love of alien is still universally unheeded in modern times. Leviticus 19:34, expressly demands in regard to the stranger, 'You shall love him as yourself.' The Talmud mentions that the precept to love, or not to oppress, the stranger occurs thirty-six times in the Torah. The reason for this constantly-repeated exhortation is that those who have been downtrodden frequently proved to be the worst oppressors when they acquire power over anyone.

Widow or orphan. Who are bereft of their human protector and destitute of the physical force to defend their rights.

You afflict. The verb is changed from the plural in the preceding verse to the singular in this verse; and Ibn Ezra makes the fine comment: if a single individual afflicts the widow and orphan, and the community does not intervene to protect them, punishment will fall on all.

My anger shall become hot. The punishment of hard-heartedness against the weak is pronounced with extraordinary emphasis, and a severe 'measure for measure' is threatened.

Despite the above words having been written in 1960, they seem so contemporary, as, in fact, do the words of the above-quoted verses of the Torah, written some 3300 years ago. There is little to add to this moral teaching, except perhaps for the words of a more

recent chief rabbi of the British Empire, Lord Jonathan Sacks, who is quoted as saying, “After World War II, we helped the refugees because they were Jewish. Now, we help the refugees, because we are Jewish.”

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Share a time in your life when you felt like a “stranger” or an “alien.” How did it feel? What might you have wanted someone to do for you to make you more comfortable?
- Think about the socio-historical context of the Torah. Why might the “widow and orphan” have been singled out to represent the powerless people in society?
- What responsibility might we have to assure that the “stranger, widow, and orphan” are treated properly in our own communities?