

Teaching a Troubled People How to Love

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The Bible offers us a window into the history of the Jewish people. But the Bible - and the circles of interpreters that have gathered around it over the generations - also offers us a mirror. It is through the looking glass of the text that we glimpse the *Shekhina*, and in which we begin to understand ourselves. So let us look into the mirror of this week's Torah portion and do some reflecting.

At the heart of the *parasha*, which sits at the heart of *Sefer Vayikra*, the book that sits at the centre of the entire Torah, we find a luminous, radiant phrase: *Love the stranger, as you would yourself - ki gerim heyitem be-eretz mitzrayim - because you were strangers in the land of Egypt*. This phrase contains a whole world. Let us explore it together.

First a note on the language: *ger* is invariably translated in English as *stranger*, *foreigner*, *alien*. This is, as anyone with basic *ulpan* Hebrew knows, an injustice of language. *Ger* comes from the Hebrew root *gur*, which simply means 'to dwell', 'to live'. All the translations focus on the difference, translating *ger* as alien, yet the Hebrew original insists not on what divides us but on what unites us. We both inhabit the same land. We both have a stake in the same future. So let us find a way to live side by side.

Now the plain reading of the *passuk*, though there is nothing plain about it, would be to say: *because you were once slaves in Egypt, because you were once vulnerable, it is natural for you to feel the vulnerability of those who are now in need. Because you know what it was like to be there, you would be the first to defend, the first to champion and protect those who are now here.*

Yet, let us look deeply into the mirror of the text and ask ourselves: is that really true? Do we really find it that natural to love people with the same life experiences as ourselves? Do we really find it that easy to extend to others the generosity we ourselves have been denied?

History tells us that more often than not, the opposite is true. More often than not, we repeat patterns of abuse. Following national trauma, a people can become insular and intolerant. The text knows that, left to ourselves, we, like every other people at every other time in history, have a tendency to do unto others the *evil* done unto us.

Why is this? Rashi, the medieval exegetical master, comments on this verse and he suggests a heart-stopping reason: '*mum she-becha al ta'amer le-chaverecha* - a blemish that you possess, don't attribute it to your friend' (Rashi on *Vayikra* 19:34). And Rashi explains: '*keivan she-gerim hayitem, gnay hu lachem lehazkir* - because you were slaves, it is a source of shame for you to be reminded of this' (Rashi on *Baba Metzia* 59b).

What Rashi says is that because of our history, we are at greater risk of projecting unto others the traits we cannot accept in ourselves. So when the Torah calls on us to love the stranger, it does so not because it is natural for us to do so - but *davka* because it isn't. And for a simple reason: the stranger reminds us of our former, inferior selves.

Like so often, resolution is found, however tentatively, in the *haftarah*. Drawn from the prophet Amos, it is addressed to the House of Jacob. What is the story of Jacob? Let us say, he started off in a complex family dynamic. All his life, he moves about like a fugitive, a stranger, unable to find rest. Ironically, after stealing the birthright from his brother, it's Jacob who becomes the *ger*. Jacob, the supplanted supplanter.

Then, remarkably, he starts a process of wrestling with himself and with his past. Rich in ambiguity, the text describes how Jacob wrestles in the dark, refusing to yield. Who is the

nameless, faceless shadow with whom he wrestles? More than anything he wrestles with his fear of his brother, Esau. And it proves wounding experience.

Yet, as dawn breaks, it's the *shadow* that flees. Jacob becomes Israel, is able to cross the Yabbok river into the land of Israel and reach out and embrace his brother. Only after addressing the core wound of his being, the insult that fractured his life, was Jacob able to fulfil his birthright. Only after coming to terms with his own neglected shadow, was he able to become whole.

What this suggests is that we need to do some serious work in order to become passionate and compassionate people. How do we achieve it? Pesach, which we have just completed, the last *matzah* crumbs finally swept up, is an institution without parallel in any religion. It is an elaborate re-enactment of history, a night of remembrance that enables us to work through the past, down to the minute details, the taste of the *lechem oni*, the bread of affliction, the salty tears, the bricks and the mortar.

Through intimate and animated collective recollection, Pesach enables us to achieve emotional distance from the humiliation of slavery. We remind ourselves in order to liberate ourselves. Our identification with the past therefore takes the sting out of any humiliation. Pesach enables us to *own* our past, and because of that, we become able to identify with people who are not yet free.

Today, Israel and the Jewish people face numerous challenges. In meeting those challenges, this week's *parasha* offers us three suggestions.

First, may we be sensitive to the words we use. May we guard ourselves from the sins of language, lest we add injustice to injustice by referring to a *ger*, who lives in our midst, as a *foreigner*, or a convert, who in Hebrew is also called a *ger*, as someone *other than us*.

Second, may we remember that our past has equal power to *blind* us, or to *bind* us, to the needs of the stranger. This community has been a pioneer in the reaching out to asylum

seekers in London, a project that has enriched everyone involved. This week's *parasha* would suggest there is a deep connection between your sensitivity to Jewish history and your social justice work. May your efforts continue to gain in strength and inspire others to follow.

Finally, may we learn from Jacob and the mirror his story provides. Like Jacob, may we find the courage to confront our fears, reach out and embrace those with whom we have battled for so long. And like Jacob, may we allow the depth of our wound to become the depth of our love.