



Sermon Tidbits

FEBRUARY 20, 2017

Parashat Mishpatim

One Law

And a stranger you shall not wrong (Exodus 23:20)

ולא תונו את הגר (שמות כג:כ)

The Aluma organization, founded in 1983 by the Religious Kibbutz Movement, oversees a wide range of programs throughout Israel providing assistance and support to tens of thousands of young Israelis from all segments of the population, offering them an equal ticket into mature civilian life in Israeli society. One of Aluma's fascinating programs caters specifically to the Arab segment of Israeli society. Aluma realized that Arab-Israelis enter higher education at a lower rate than similar Arab populations both in Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. Significant cultural and educational factors, including a language barrier and unique social and cultural impediments limited students' ambitions and ability to achieve a university-level education. To that end, Aluma created "[Raud](#)," a program aimed at increasing Arab-Israeli integration into academia. Today "Raud" coordinators at [36 centers within the Israeli-Arab community](#) actively identify young adults between the ages of 18 and 30, and direct them towards academic frameworks, and assist them through the completion of their initial year of B.A. studies. Why would an Israeli religious movement create a program geared specifically for non-Jewish children? Among many other reasons, as a people we are commanded to care not only for ourselves, but for the "other" as well.

The commandment that, "A stranger you shall not wrong, neither shall you oppress him" represents just one of thirty-six times that the Torah commands the Israelites to treat minorities within the community equitably. Who is this "stranger" that we must treat fairly? While Rashi (on verse 20) writes that this refers a Jew "who was not born in the country but came from another country to live there," Ibn Ezra (also on verse 20) explains that this refers to a "*Ger Toshav*"—a non-Jew who has settled permanently among the Jewish people. Commenting on the verse, "One law shall be to him that is home-born and to the stranger that lives among you," (Exodus 12:49) Professor Yedidia Stern of the Israel Democracy Institute writes that these verses relate a critical message to the Israelite nation that had just endured centuries of oppression as strangers and outsiders in Egypt. Noting that many Egyptians joined the Israelites during the Exodus, he explains, "This verse teaches us a great lesson: Despite the fact that the only example that the [new] nation has experienced with regard to citizen-stranger relations is one of exploitation and subjugation that targeted them in Egypt, the Children of Israel were expected to act in a different manner. It was incumbent upon them to afford equal treatment to the very people who had enslaved them. In that time period—and even today—this is a sensational, far-reaching commandment. The formation of one identity cannot come at the expense of those who carry a different identity. On both the non-Jewish stranger and the Israelite follows the same law."

Today, Israel works hard to fulfill this requirement to address the needs of its minority populations including the Arab, Christian and Druze communities. While every Israeli citizen enjoys full democratic rights, Israel recognizes that each population faces unique challenges that require additional attention and assistance. According to the [Times of Israel](#), in a video released last week, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu addressed this issue and touted his government's "tireless" efforts to boost Israel's Arab minority and integrate the community into mainstream society and the economy. [In the video](#), Netanyahu lists a number of important achievements in the Israeli-Arab sector, "Over the past decade, the number of Arabs working in high-tech in Israel increased tenfold; Arab students studying at the Technion, Israel's MIT, tripled; Arab judges nearly doubled; an Arab Supreme Court Justice served as chairman of the Central Election Committee overseeing our national elections; Arab participation in the workforce has grown significantly; Arab unemployment is down; and for the first time ever, an Arab has been appointed a deputy

commissioner of the police, the second highest rank attainable.” Of course, things are not perfect and these efforts must continue. At the same time, we can take great pride in the fact that the Jewish state works to uphold the obligation not only of equal treatment, but also of equal opportunity for all of its citizens, no matter their ethnicity, origin or religious faith. ■

Expressing Appreciation

You shall cast it to the dogs (Exodus 22:30)

לכלב תשליחון אותו (שמות כב:ל)

Hamas recently announced that it has elected Yahya Sinwar, which it considers one of its most ruthless leaders, as the terror group’s new head in the Gaza Strip. According to the [Times of Israel](#), Sinwar was sentenced to life in 1989 for murdering twelve Palestinian collaborators with Israel and spent 22 years in Israeli prisons before being released in the 2011 prisoner exchange deal for IDF soldier Gilad Shalit. “He is considered hawkish even within Hamas, and opposes any compromise in its policies regarding the Palestinian Authority and Israel. Even from prison, he was one of the main opponents of the Shalit exchange deal that saw him freed because he regarded the terms, one Israeli soldier for 1,027 prisoners, as a surrender to Israel’s conditions.” While we of course recoil from the radical hatred of a terrorist devoted not only to Israel’s destruction, Sinwar’s vitriol for Israel is even more troubling in light of his personal history. According to the Israeli website [Walla News](#), Sinwar is alive only because of Israel. Ten years ago, Sinwar was rushed from prison to an Israeli hospital where he underwent life-saving brain surgery. Despite this fact, Sinwar remains devoted to the destruction of the Jewish state that saved his life. Through his actions, the new Hamas chief demonstrates an utter disdain for the value of *hakarat hatov*—a fundamental human attribute in our parshah.

A verse in this week’s parshah instructs us that, “You shall be holy people unto Me; therefore you shall not eat any flesh that is torn of beasts in the field; you shall cast it to the dogs.” (22:30) This verse relates the prohibition against eating meat that was not properly ritually slaughtered; one may not consume that meat but instead, “you shall cast it to the dogs.” The Sages wondered: Must one give his non-kosher meat specifically to his dog? Rashi explains that one can dispose of his non-kosher meat in any way that he sees fit. Why then does the verse suggest giving the meat to a dog? “To teach us that the Holy One does not withhold the proper reward to every creature, as it is written, ‘But against any of the Children of Israel shall not a dog whet his tongue...’ (Exodus 11:7) Said the Holy One, ‘Give [the dog] his proper reward.’” Moses warned Pharaoh that during the pandemonium of the plague of the first-born, the Israelite camp would enjoy such tranquility that even the dogs would remain silent. In reward for their silence on that fateful night, the verse suggests that we throw our non-kosher meat to our dogs.

The Sages saw this verse as a lesson in the attribute of *hakarat hatov*—appreciating the kindness of others: If we must express appreciation to our dogs for the kindness and silence of their ancestors in Egypt, how much more must we take heed to express thanks and appreciation for the kindness that others do on our behalf! Rashi derives a similar lesson from the actions of Moses. When Moses imposed the plague of blood on the Egyptians, he was told to instruct Aaron to, “Take your rod, and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt...that they may become blood.” (Exodus 7:19) Why was Aaron instructed to impose the plague and not Moses? Rashi explains, “Because the Nile protected Moses when he was cast into it, for this reason it was not afflicted by his hand...” Moses could not be asked to harm the very river that had saved his life. Do dogs deserve appreciation? Perhaps. But does a river have feelings? Of course not. On the other hand, people do indeed experience strong emotions, and through these lessons we learn the primacy of both feeling and expressing appreciation for the kindness and assistance that we receive from others.

As supporters of a strong U.S.-Israel relationship, this element of *hakarat hatov* is especially important. We’re quite vocal when Israel needs America’s backing, as we should be. But, after the fact, when the appropriations bill passes or when the United States vetoes yet another anti-Israel UN resolution, too often we allow ourselves to take this friendship for granted. We fail to pick up the phone or send an email to our senator or representative simply to say, “Thank you. We appreciate your friendship and support.” Parashat Mishpatim reminds us that we can never neglect the importance of *hakarat hatov*. This attribute represents one of the most basic, fundamental elements of our personal and collective identities, the core of what it means to be human. ■