

"RIGHTEOUSNESS - THE REAL REASON"

This morning's Sidra offers us a number of characteristic gems of genuine Jewish compassion. One of these laws, which constitutes a sublime example of Biblical righteousness, reads: Lo tateh mishpat ger yatom, ve'lo tabbol begged almanah (Dt. 24:17), "You shall not pervert the cause of the stranger and the orphan, and you shall not take the widow's garment as pledge." We are, of course, forbidden to commit an injustice even against the secure and the wealthy, but we are doubly warned against exploiting those who are naturally defenseless, such as the stranger or the fatherless. In addition, Jewish compassion is such that we must not hurt the widow. Therefore, we must not compound her social and domestic anguish, whether she be rich or poor, by adding the humiliation of taking her garment as a pledge. (According to most authorities, this refers to taking a pledge from her when she defaults on a loan; according to Maimonides, we must not extract a pledge from the widow even at the time of making the loan.) This verse forms one of the most attractive aspects of Biblical morality.

The problem arises in the reason that the Torah offers for this law: ve'zakharta ki eved hayita be'mitzrayim, "and you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you therefrom, therefore do I command you to do this thing" (Dt. 24:18). This is more than a reason for a specific injunction or law. It constitutes a philosophy of social relations --

or, if you will, a Jewish theology of righteousness and compassion. And here lies a grave problem indeed. For the psychology of identifying with the suffering and the wretched does not stand up under scrutiny as a sufficient ethical theory.

What the Torah tells us is that acts of righteousness should be motivated by identification with the victim of misfortune, by searching our own experience and discovering therein similar suffering, so that we might be able to sympathize with the person who is now subject to misery and pain. But is that a really adequate motive for compassion and righteousness?

I find three major deficiencies or criticisms of this theory.

First, it may lead to arrogance. If I too suffered, and I now have emerged into a more fortunate position, then my attitude might well be: "If I came up the hard way -- so can you!" The self-made man is often unsympathetic with the man who has not yet made it. One who has survived adversity can turn callous against a man who is now experiencing it and shows no signs of emerging from his misfortune. Thus Jews, who are no strangers to persecution and oppression, sometimes feel tempted to say, "We are the original ghetto dwellers, and we got out. No one helped us, we helped ourselves. Why don't you do the same?" The attitude is, of course, wrong. But it is a not unexpected result of the psychology of identification. This kind of arrogance does not lead to compassionate and righteous conduct.

The second problem is that of invidious comparisons.

If I am expected to be righteous towards the stranger and the orphan, and to exercise compassion to the widow, on the basis of my former servitude in Egypt, then I may conclude that the stranger and the orphan and the widow do not deserve much sympathy from me, because my condition was worse than theirs is now. There is a not unnatural tendency to say, "I had it worse than you! I was a slave and you are only a stranger or an orphan." This propensity for invidious comparisons becomes especially tempting when the present sufferer stupidly exaggerates his own condition by laying claim to the role of the world's greatest victim. When the Negro, who has things bad enough without undue extravagance, blandly maintains that his experience in America was worse than the Jewish suffering under Hitler, he invites the very correct response: "Nonsense! The Holocaust was immeasurably more miserable than your economic and social and political bondage." Certainly this kind of attitude does not lead to healthful results.

The third difficulty with this particular approach is that it results in insinuations of unworthiness. If I must compare my suffering with that of the victim who confronts me, I may well conclude that I deserved to be helped, whereas he does not. I was deserving -- I possessed the culture, and education, and tradition, a heritage, a close family group. "You people" know nothing of this, you are savages, hence you are unworthy of the dignity to which you aspire. This is, of course, a dreadful oversimplification

of enormously complex social and cultural problems. But it is a possible unhealthy result of the comparison that issues from a psychology of identification.

So that the theory of ve'zakharta ki eved hayita be'mitzrayim as the rationale for Lo tateh mishpat ger yatom does not appear adequate. The concept of identifying my own past experience with those now disadvantaged seems insufficient as a working theory of compassionate and righteous conduct. On the contrary, such comparisons can lead to the opposite results.

I therefore prefer, and commend to your attention, an alternative interpretation of this verse, one that is far more subtle, far more sensitive, and more immune to criticism than the usual interpretation upon which we have based our analysis. This explanation is offered by R. Jacob, the famous "Baal Ha-turim," who tells us that the verse to remember that we were slaves in Egypt does not refer to our suffering and our misery, but rather to one particular incident in the centuries of our unhappy Egyptian exile. Particularly, he maintains that the Torah refers to the time that God enhanced the charm of the Israelites in the eyes of the Egyptian population, so that the Egyptians lent the Israelites their golden and silver vessels, and later when Egypt was destroyed it was this which allowed the Israelites to emerge from slavery into freedom with at least the wherewithal to survive. In other words, the meaning of the verse according to the "Baal Ha-turim,"

is that we must build our righteousness and compassion not upon the element of our suffering but upon our salvation, not upon our unfortunate servitude, but upon our fortuitous assistance by people from whom we least expected it. We help the wretch not because we identify with his misery, but because we remember that we were once the beneficiaries of strangers, and that gratitude -- rather than the misery -- lingers with us and causes us to bestow our grace and help upon others. You must help not because you are a partner in this man's suffering, but you must make him a partner in your good fortune. You must be good not because you were unlucky, but because you were lucky; not because you too were broken, but because you got a break. You must support the disadvantaged because you, by some quirk, were once the recipient of a stranger's favor -- unnatural, unexpected, even irrational! Hence, now you must become a benefactor for these others, even if such benefaction is unnatural, even if it is unexpected, even if it is irrational!

This interpretation of the Torah's verse, which emphasizes not the remembrance of suffering but the remembrance of gratitude, presents us with an ethic which is without arrogance, without invidious comparisons, without unworthy insinuations.

I wish to make it clear: I by no means want to apologize for minority groups or the poor or the distressed when they deserve rebuke and reproach. In Judaism, a poor man is not excused from all the restraints of ethical and moral conduct by virtue of his poverty; we treat him as a full and responsible human being, and

do not patronize him by inverse discrimination. I therefore do not consider all welfare cases as angels, I do not regard black power advocates as "beautiful souls," and I do not agree that anti-Semites deserve positions of trust in large universities simply because they happen to be black. From my own narrow point of view, Black Panthers and White Tigers are equally zoological specimens, not quite ready for full participation in a human community as long as they retain their bestial overtones. The question of the black and the white man, the poor and the rich, the dissatisfied and the establishment, is an enormously difficult problem in this age of social revolution. The problems cannot be solved by simple slogans or banalities, whether liberal or conservative. We each have our points of view, and they must always be open to modification. But all of this is irrelevant to the Biblical demand upon our righteousness and our compassion, our charitableness and our commitment to social justice, our hessed and our tzeddek. Despite the poor woman's immorality -- if indeed that it is, and the black man's unjustified rage -- if it is unjustified, or the Spanish man's inordinate demands -- if they are inordinate, we as Jews must never be unjust, unkind, or without pity. We must remember that when we were slaves in Egypt, we were heartily disliked by the Egyptians -- yet, at one point, we were the beneficiaries of their kindness and their righteousness. That alone should motivate us towards the great Jewish ideals of hessed and tzeddek, comparisons with other victims of bad luck and oppression notwithstanding.

Permit me to conclude by reference to a verse from a holiday very much out of season today: Passover. In the Haggadah, we read as part of one of the most popular of our hymns, ilu natan lanu et mamonum ve'lo kara lanu et ha-yam dayyenu, "If He had given us their (the Egyptians') money, and He had not split for us the Red Sea, that would have been sufficient." What strange words! Is this meant to be an indication of our crass commercialism, our materialism? -- If only God had given us the mamon, the money, of the Egyptians, then we would have been ready to yield on redemption itself?

According to the "Baal Ha-turim," however, I believe we now have a new understanding in this verse of the dayyenu. If God had given us the mamon of the Egyptians, then indeed dayyenu, it would have been enough even without the redemption -- for then, although we would have been politically unredeemed, we would have been ethically uplifted. For by receiving the gifts of the Egyptians, we learned for all time how to be righteous and compassionate towards all victims of oppression and persecution and adversity. As a result of this act of beneficence by the Egyptians, we learned for all time how to treat the stranger, the orphan, and the widow.

A lesson of this sort is greater than any redemption.

Indeed, dayyenu.