

PARASHAS MISHPATIM

Old Memories

Certain things in life are given, at least for people reared according to Judaic values and ideals. Compassion for the weak and downtrodden. Sympathy for those less fortunate than ourselves. Kindness to the disadvantaged. Hospitality to strangers. Why then does the Torah, in this week's portion, find it necessary to tell us to be kind to converts? Would it occur to anyone to act otherwise to a newcomer?

Furthermore, why does the Torah go on to tell us to be kind to converts because we too were "strangers in the land of Egypt"? Do we really need this rationalization in order to be sensitive to the feelings of a convert? And if we do a reason to be compassionate, will the experiences of our ancestors in Egypt many centuries ago really sensitize us to the feelings of newcomers whom we encounter today?

The commentators explain that the Torah certainly does not expect people to be so callous as to offend newcomers to Judaism deliberately. Clearly, these people are going through a very challenging experience, turning away from the old familiar pattern of their lives and setting out on uncharted waters. Many aspects of this experience are undoubtedly very traumatic and disorienting, and we all can be expected to be sympathetic and supportive. The problem lies elsewhere. Do we really know what the convert is feeling? Do we truly relate to the turmoil in his heart? Do we have any firsthand knowledge of the emotional strain, insecurity and loneliness that a newcomer experiences? Obviously not. How then can we be sensitive to them even if we want to?

Therefore, the Torah reminds us that we ourselves were once strangers in the land of Egypt, a persecuted minority struggling to survive in a hostile environment. Our very nationhood was forged in an alien setting, and the memory is deeply etched into our national consciousness. We need to connect to that experience in our minds, and in this way, we can revive within ourselves a hint of the experience of being a stranger in an alien land. Only in this way can we sensitize ourselves to the turmoil in the newcomer's heart. Only in this way can we treat him with true sympathy and friendship.

A wise old rabbi was trudging though the snow-clogged streets of a little village. Finally, he came to the house of one of the richest men in the village. He knocked on the door and waited patiently.

A servant opened the door and, seeing the old rabbi, immediately invited him in. But the rabbi just shook his head and asked to see the master of the house.

In no time, the rich man came hurrying to the door. "Rabbi, why are you standing outside?" he wanted to know. "It's so cold out there. Please come in where it is warmer."

"Thank you so much," said the rabbi, "but I prefer to stay out here. Can we talk for a moment?"

"Why, certainly, certainly," said the rich man. He shivered and pulled his jacket closer about him.

"Well, you see, it's like this," the rabbi began. "There are a number of poor families in this village who don't have any money - "

"I'm sorry for interrupting, rabbi," the rich man said. His teeth were chattering. "You know I always contribute to the poor and hungry. Why can't we talk about this inside? Why do we have to stand out here?"

"Because these people need firewood," the rabbi explained. "I am collecting for firewood for poor families."

"So why can't we talk inside?" asked the rich man.

"Because I want you to feel what they are feeling," said the rabbi, "even if only for a few minutes. Imagine how they must be shivering in their drafty little houses with the ice-cold furnaces! The more you give me, the more families will be spared this dreadful cold."

In our own lives, we often relate to others - children, family members, friends, associates - by the standards of our own point of view. We see them through the prism of our own experience. But this does not lend itself to true sympathy and effective communication. Their attitudes and mindsets are colored by the nuances of their own characters and experiences and are therefore vastly different from ours. In order for us to be truly sensitive to them, we must try to put ourselves in their place. Only then will we be able to listen with open ears. Only then will we gain an inkling of what they are going through, of what they really feel inside. Only then can we even begin to provide the sympathy and support they deserve.