

Rabbi Boris Dolin

Everyone tells their life story in their own way, and the way we do this gets to the heart of how we define ourselves as individuals and as a community. How we relate to our past, and how willing we are to tell about the blessings and the pain and the challenges determines how we are able to live in the present and helps us and those around us gain meaning from our experiences. This is at its core about the process of reflection... As the philosopher Hannah Erent once said, hearing stories "reveal meaning without committing the error of defining it." With a story, truth finds its way to us through the path of life, and through listening to the journeys of others we find our own place in the greater web of our community.

This week a new chapter of the story of the Jewish people begins. We have made our way from the family stories of Genesis, to Moses and the escape from Egypt. The Jewish people begin their years of wandering through the desert. And then this week the story takes another turn--the people have crossed the sea of reeds, they have received the Torah from Mt. Sinai. And then we read a very unique introduction, *V'eleh Mishpatim* –*these are the rules* that you should set before them.

What are we to take away from this? Torah in its most literal form means “teaching” or “instruction”, and as we know, the Torah is a mix of both stories and laws. Up until this point, the Torah was mostly narrative—adam and eve, Noah, patriarchs and matriarchs, Joseph and Moses, with some laws mixed in--these are the stories that are so memorable that they have their own books and movies. While many important laws have already been given, it is the story that has held the Torah together so far. But then Moses receives the ten commandments, and the Torah switches its tone—*now we have laws with a mix of stories. And remarkably, this is the moment, when we take a break from the story, that the Torah becomes alive.* From this point on, the Jewish

people are asked to learn from the lessons, from the stories of their past, and through the lens of law and practice, now must live out what they have learned.

There is a classic tale from the rabbis that reminds us of this remarkable process, how the entirety of Jewish practice and belief owes itself to the memory of the experiences of those who came before us: Two writers rushed in the *beit midrash*, the study hall of the *Rizhiner rebbe*. They wanted him to write the preface to their respective books, one on Jewish law, the other on *aggadah*, the tales and lore of the Talmud. The law scholar was sure that the rebbe would see him first because of his expertise on Jewish ritual and practice. However the rebbe said that he would see the storyteller first, telling him: “Our *Torah* begins with stories, were it not for the stories, we would have no basis for the *mitzvot* that follow.” *It is the stories that bring to life all that we do and make sure that others can learn from our experiences.*

So what is the first law that is mentioned as we make our way into this post Sinai part of the journey of the Jewish people? Not to give a certain amount of our money to charity, or more details on respecting our parents, not even rules of how to keep a kosher kitchen! The first law, is about what do when we acquire a Hebrew eved, a Hebrew servant, a Hebrew slave.

כִּי תִקְנֶה עֶבֶד עִבְרִי שֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים יַעֲבֹד וּבְשִׁבְעַת יֵצֵא לְחֻפְשֵׁי חָנָם:

Should you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall work [for] six years, and in the seventh [year], he shall go out to freedom without charge.

And it goes on

If he comes [in] alone, he shall go out alone; if he is a married man, his wife shall go out with him. If his master gives him a wife, and she bears him sons or daughters, the woman and her children shall belong to her master, and he shall go out alone. But if the slave says, "I love my master, my wife, and my children. I will not go free, his master shall bring him to the judges, and he shall bring him to the door or to

the doorpost, and his master shall bore his ear with an awl, and he shall serve him forever.

The Israelites just left slavery, spent years of working in pain and suffering and now we are given rules on how to rule over others! We have seen God's power, God can create, can heal and kill, and we might assume that if God is truly just, God could have just rid the world of this painful kind of relationship. Yet instead God gives laws to continue the practice in a what could in a way be seen in more ethical way. How could this make sense from the very God who brought the Jews out of Egypt--out of slavery?

To understand this part of the story of the Jewish people, we need to explore the reason why these laws, these laws dealing with slaves, are the first law that are given after Mt. Sinai. In a way by beginning this new chapter in the journey of the Jewish people with something so painful is a reminder that above all we must work to remember where we came from and remember the importance of hesed, of compassion and human dignity as we move ahead in our journeys. To understand what it means to be free, we need to know what it means to be enslaved.

Our tradition gives many explanations for of slavery. On its most basic level, the laws of Mt. Sinai were given to a people who were simply living in a world where slavery was not only allowed in most of the cultures that surrounded them, but it was also common. For nearly all of the surrounding nations, this slavery was brutal and cruel, yet it was also as a matter of course, accepted as part of society. Yet instead of simply outlawing this brutal practice, and making the Jews the ethical outcasts in a very brutal world, they are commanded instead to take small steps towards improving this painful act of human history. As our tradition tells us, this allowed this new society, this community of law abiding Jews to live as part of the greater world, *and also be able to then make more of an impact on changing those other cultures.*

While the Torah could have just given a law ending slavery, this would have also ended a part of the story of the evolution of the Jewish people. How the story plays out is now up to the Jews--with slavery and everything else they encounter in their journey, they now need to make the important decisions. They need to decide between right and wrong, they need to look deeply at their history and their own community, and decide what choices need to be made. Yes, slavery is wrong, but this fact can only exist in the world when those who have experienced slavery can make that decision on their own. This is why the Talmud and other legal and ethical texts which came after the Torah spend many pages, discussing the concept of slavery, creating the rules which require treating not only slaves, but employees, neighbors, strangers and animals with the utmost respect and compassion. When Slavery was eventually outlawed in Jewish tradition, *we knew very well the reasons why.*

Again as we reflect on the Torah this week, and this painful intro to the laws we know that what matters most is how we hold on to our have to decide how we hold on to our past, and how we tell our stories to others. We are asked as Jews to never shy away from our confrontations with the memories of our past, and instead use them to fix the brokenness in the world and fight injustice. As we are reminded in the Passover Haggadah, we know that in every generation we are obligated to see oneself (lirot et atzmo) as though we have personally come from Egypt". *But the Sephardic haggadah has a slightly different command: "In every generation we are obligated to **show** oneself (leharot et atzmo) as though we have personally come from Egypt".* These two different ways of seeing the past are two different ways of understanding our history, and how we perform our duty today. When we look at our personal and communal stories, we do have to remember the pain, and also see the place that we had in creating healing for ourselves and our community--we have to "see ourselves" in the people who came before us. Yet, as the Sephardic Haggadah shows us, we also have to "show" ourselves and be above all present to the needs of others and to constantly work to make

sure that others do not experience the pain that we did. Remember the past, but use it to stand up and work for healing.

There is an incredible passage in the Talmud that I shared during YK, in the tractate Avodah Zarah (18b), where the rabbis are debating whether Jews should be allowed to attend Roman arena where the gladiators would be fighting wild animals and each other. In these exhibitions, it would be up to the spectators to decide the fate of the victim--thumbs up the victim would be spared for another day, thumbs down the victim would die. The rabbis decided that we should never go to such an evil place, because it goes against all our values of goodness and compassion. Yet Rabbi Natan retorts that in fact we should go so that when the mob stands up to seal the fate of the victim, those who have compassion in their hearts can rise up as one and scream to save his life. To not go to the arena would only be ignoring the reality of the pain and suffering that is possible. If when we encounter suffering in the world, we make sure to not just question but to stand up and use what we have gained from our pain to make change then we are truly responding to suffering with hope.

This is where we can go back to that first line of this week's parsha, *v eleh ha mishpatim*, these are the laws. We have reached the point in the Torah where we no longer are reading just the "stories" of our people, we are now beginning the story of how we are asked to live our day to day lives, through law and practice. There is still a place to hear the about the lives of others, but now the narrative moves to us. *You have made it to Mt. Sinai, you have grown and travelled as a people as Jews, and now it is your turn to live an ethical life, a life where there are certain rules you have to follow as you create your own story.*

So, "these are the laws"—is not just the end of all the best stories in the Torah and the start of the laws, it is really marking the beginning of *our story*. And we are being asked to take ownership of our history, both our communal history and the most deeply personal of our experiences. We know that only we can control how we see our past--we know that there are times when reflection on our story gives us and gives others

strength, and there are times when the strength comes from living in the present and putting the focus on moving forward.

It is up to us to be good people and help build stronger relationships and communities, and the Torah wants us to know that we will never be perfect—creating a better world and creating a better self takes time. Yet with so much else in our world still in need of fixing, we can take it as a reminder that our communal story and our personal histories are a process, and if we can find a way to tell them, then the future can only be brighter.