

Jeremy Lin has captured the hearts and eyes of New Yorkers and sports fans around the world. If you don't know who I am talking about, that's okay – I barely did either until yesterday! But one of the good things about coming to daily tefillah at the Bayit is that you get to hear the news that really matters! And all the chatter in the last days about Jeremy Lin made it worth my while to learn more about him – and to attempt this morning to connect this phenomenon to Parashat Mishpatim!

So if you don't know, Jeremy Lin is a rising star, a point guard for the New York Knicks who emerged from relative indistinction to tremendous acclaim with some great performances in recent weeks since being given the chance to get some serious playing time. He is the first NBA player to score at least 20 points and seven assists in each of his first four starts. He's a Harvard grad. He's 23.5 years old. He's an evangelical Christian, and a person of great faith and humility – a tension with being a sport star, as David Brooks' column (which I thank Bernie Horowitz for pointing me to) quoting Rav Soloveitchik in the New York Times yesterday makes clear. And he is an Asian-American.

It's this last part of his identity that has generated a lot of discussion and controversial stances in the media. Some have said that he is overnoticed, getting more attention than his performance warrants, because he is Asian-American. Other have argued the flip side of the same coin, that Lin was undernoticed, and that the reason it took this long to recognize his talent was because he is Asian-American, and that Asian-Americans are simply not taken seriously in the realm of basketball prowess. And there are those who have argued that race has not been a factor, and this is simply a story of amazing basketball and a player who worked hard at every stage to improve and make himself noticed and successful.

What seems clear is that he is noticeably different on the court than most other players, and that he is a champion for many Asian-Americans, and that he has endured tremendous insult in his young career. A couple of articles from the San Francisco Chronicle during his college years highlight the racism he has faced already. When he was playing for Harvard, Lin was quoted as saying, "I hear everything: 'Go back to China. Orchestra is on the other side of campus. Open up your eyes,' " Lin said. "They're yelling at me before, during and after. I'm an easy target because I'm Asian. Sometimes it makes me uncomfortable, but it's part of the game."¹

¹ San Francisco Chronicle, 12/16/08, "Asian Americans remain rare in men's college basketball", by Bryan Chu.

Another article writes, “His high school coach, Peter Diepenbrock, ... pointed out that even people who don't mean any harm assume that Lin, whose parents came to the United States from Taiwan, doesn't have game. At least, not the same game as Kobe Bryant. The first time Lin went to a Pro-Am game at Kezar Pavilion in Golden Gate Park, his coach said, someone there informed him: "Sorry, sir, there's no volleyball here tonight. It's basketball.””²

Maybe it's my naivete that made me so surprised and pained by those comments – at Ivy League schools, or wherever. But it hurt me to know someone, especially such a good, hard-working person, has to undergo that kind of abuse.

These words hurt. And they take us to perhaps the heart of our parashah, our relationship with the ger, the stranger among us, mentioned twice in our portion, and ultimately 36 times in the Torah. This is a topic the Torah is obsessed with. Our injunctions regarding the ger appear twice in the parshah. First, in 22:20:

וְגֵר לֹא תוֹנֶה וְלֹא תִלְחָצֶנּוּ: כִּי גֵרִים הֵייתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

“You shall not abuse or oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

And then, in 23:9:

וְגֵר לֹא תִלְחָץ וְאַתֶּם יָדַעְתֶּם אֶת נַפְשׁ הַגֵּר כִּי גֵרִים הֵייתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

“You shall not oppress the stranger, for you know the soul of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

The commentators debate the differences between these verses, and Rav Hirsch even suggests that they are bookends for a section of laws whose core are the core values of these verses, equality, love, and protection for all.

I want to note their similarity, the verb that appears in both – לא תלחצנו – do not oppress, or squeeze, the stranger. This verb takes us back to its immediately past mention, as Nehama Leibowitz notes – in Egypt, where we were victims of the same squeeze, and God says in Exodus 3:9 to Moshe:

וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה צַעֲקַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּאָה אֵלַי וְגַם רָאִיתִי אֶת הַלַּחֲץ אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לֹחֲצִים אֹתָם:

“Now, my son, the cries of the Israelites have come to me, and I have seen the oppression (lahatz) with which Egypt oppresses them.”

² San Francisco Chronicle, 7/22/10, “Bay Area appeal makes Lin good bet”, by Gwen Knapp.

What was the *lahatz* we experienced in Egypt, and what is that *lahatz* we are enjoined not to force on others? In its simple sense, it means being put under pressure, coerced – in the case of Egypt, forced into a life of servitude, our free choice being taken away. But what does it mean for the stranger? The verses in our parashah are probably not simply telling us not to enslave the stranger, but presumably something more subtle, more nuanced. The Rabbis, in interpreting the previous phrase, לא תונה (do not abuse [the stranger]), say it means some sort of verbal abuse, namely focusing on the ger's past as a way to disregard his or her seriousness in the present. I believe that is an apt explanation not just of לא תונה (do not abuse), but of לא תלחצנו (do not oppress).

Not to oppress or to squeeze can mean not to box in, or confine, or define. One of the ways we oppress others is when we define them ourselves, when we put them in a box. When we decide which parts of their persona are their core selves, or make them who they are.

Part of what is insidious in racism is not just linking behaviors or values or attitudes to ethnicities or skin colors, but then applying that on the individual level. To say “Jews are cheap” is wrong, but then it is a second misdeed to presume a particular Jew is cheap as a result. That is *lahatz*, that is pressing the ger, the stranger – assuming something about him or her because of only one element of who he or she is – or was.

I am occasionally aware of that subtle way this act of essentializing and then applying that essentialism works in my life. I'll be talking to someone whom I have recently met, and I won't be aware of all the assumptions I have made about them until they say something that goes against one of those assumptions, and it surprises me. “I didn't expect someone who looks or talks or behaves that way to say *that!*” Then I have to backtrack and realize that it is only surprising because *I made that assumption myself to begin with*. I almost feel sometimes I can be aware of a person changing in front of me as they shift from the set of assumptions my visual judgment has made about them, to emerge as the person they actually are.

And this goes far beyond race. An extraordinary comment of the Sefer Hahinukh on the mitzvah of loving the ger says that we should learn from this valuable precept to show compassion to any man not in his home town, far from his friends.³ Whenever someone is out-of-place, they are a ger. The ibn Ezra explains ger very beautifully as coming from gargir, from berry cluster. On the cluster, a gargir is a bunch of berries - in-context, comfortable, and at ease. But when pulled off the branch, severed from its support, laid isolated on the table,

³ Sefer Hahinukh Mitzvah 431.

that individual berry is no longer of the gargar, but is a single ger, and an otherwise confident and comfortable person becomes a ger.⁴

We have all experienced being out-of-place, and have depended on the kindness of someone who did not essentialize us, or make assumptions about us, but encountered us as a person, to make it through that moment. I think the Torah must mention the plight of the ger so often because it is so pervasive, and so easy to mess up. Every day we encounter gerim, people out of place, estranged from their comfort zones, or just somehow distinct from their surroundings. It is probably our instinct, and maybe for good reason, to highlight those differences and try to explain them. And being sensitive to a ger doesn't mean being blind to those differences. It means not allowing ourselves to let those differences $\gamma\eta\lambda$, box-in, that ger.

Jeremy Lin has the last word this Shabbat. This young man, and I can actually call him that, answered the following 2 interview questions beautifully in an interview on a website of religion:

Much of the media attention focuses on the fact that you are not just a basketball player, but an Asian-American basketball player. Is that a large part of the way you think about yourself, as well?

"It definitely is a major part of my identity. But I don't see it as my whole identity. I belong to other groups as well..."

In addressing the challenge of being a role model, he says:

"I understand that there are kids who will look up to me, and I have a duty to be a godly role model. So in some sense, I don't play for them, but in another sense I do try to carry myself in a way that reflects God's image."⁵

We can learn so much from Jeremy Lin about what it means to be a role model, and how to interact with the ger we encounter. May the week ahead - and any encounter we have in which we feel like a stranger, or in which we encounter someone out of place - be one in which we carry Jeremy Lin's words with us, not to box them in, but to give them the freedom to be themselves.

⁴ ibn Ezra Genesis 15:13.

⁵ <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Faith-and-Fate-of-Jeremy-Lin>.