

Parshat Eikev  
Phyllis Nutkis  
8/16/14

Shabbat Shalom.

When I started preparing for this d'var Torah, I really did not want to talk about the current situation in Israel and Gaza. But I haven't been able to think about anything else. So I'm going to jump right in here and to share my thoughts with you, with the hope of starting a conversation.

The more I hear and the more I read about what's going on, the more troubled I feel. I've read columns and articles from the NY Times, the Wall Street Journal, and Al Jazeera; from Ha'aretz and the Jerusalem Post; listened to NPR and Fox News; read lots of comments and opinions from Facebook; and more, as I'm sure many of you have. Even if we ignore the obviously anti-Semitic rants, and disregard comments that are obviously ignorant or uninformed, we've heard and read everything from "Israel should give up all the land" to "We should just kill all the Arabs." But it doesn't seem as though there are any clear answers. So it seemed natural, as I sat down to write this d'var Torah, to see if there was anything in the Parsha that could shed any light on this subject, or perhaps clarify or broaden my understanding. So let's start with a question from the Parsha:

#### What does G-d demand of us?

Perek 7, pasuk 12: "And if you do obey these rules and observe them carefully, The Lord your G-d will with lovingkindness maintain the covenant with you that He made on oath with your ancestors."

The parsha begins with Moshe describing the specific ways in which G-d will sustain the covenant, to bring us into the land He has promised us, **IF** we follow His commandments: the land he will bring us to will be fertile; crops will thrive; there will be just the right amount of rain, at just the right times; we will bear children, and they will survive; our cattle will reproduce; we will be healthy... G-d will reward us with this land, because the land embodies (and in fact is critical to) everything that matters for our survival.

but it's conditional: "And **IF** you do obey these rules and observe them carefully." But we have a terrible track record in obeying G-d's rules. We have been "stiff-necked," stubborn, and defiant. So why didn't He just destroy us and "blot out our name from under the heaven?"

It's clear from this Parsha, and from many other places in the Chumash, that G-d hasn't drawn a line in the sand. He is willing to be persuaded that we shouldn't be destroyed; that we should be given another chance. He repeatedly invites human moral critique. He invites us to argue with him; to make our case. He **considered** wiping us out, and he said so out loud **because** he wanted Moshe to argue with Him, to defend us. So this is **one** thing that G-d demands from us: He wants us to be His partner in a moral debate.

But in this midst of all of this,--the descriptions of the land AND of our failures to keep the commandments, there are a couple of pasukim that seem out of place.

In perek 10, pasukim 18-19: "[G-d] upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing." "V'ahyitem et ha-ger ki gerim hayitem b'ereetz Mitzrayim. You too must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

"Ger" is usually translated, literally, as "stranger." Hazal took the biblical notion of "ger" to mean a "convert." But in the Chumash, a "ger" is more accurately described as "resident alien." The state of

being an “alien” is a result of belonging to a different culture than ours; it’s a result of that person’s “strangeness” to us. In other words, what makes a person a stranger—a ger—is **our** alienation from his or her difference. So if we are to “love the stranger,” we need to change the way we regard him. If I understand another’s culture, he is no longer alien to me. It’s very important to make clear, though, that does NOT mean that we should *adopt* the alien’s culture; in fact we are warned against this. But the other extreme is also not desirable: when we know nothing about the culture of the resident aliens who live among us, we need to familiarize ourselves; so that the “alien” is no longer a “stranger.” And as Jews, the prototypical “aliens” in a now-connected global world, we should appreciate that need.

The Talmud mentions that “Ahavat haGer,” the instruction to love, and not oppress, the stranger appears 36 times in the Torah; in fact, it’s mentioned more times than any other mandate in the Torah. Nechama Leibowitz, says that empathy for the stranger is an outgrowth of experience. “We are bidden to put ourselves in the position of the stranger by remembering how it felt when we were strangers in another land.”

Emmanuel Levinas defines the stranger as the “Other.” “The Other is what I am **not**. The Other is this, not because of his own character or psychology but because of his very... ‘otherness.’ The Other is, for example, the weak, the poor, ‘the orphan and widow,’ whereas I am the rich or the powerful.”

Why are these pasukim here? How do these two things—the land, and befriending the “other”—fit together?

Nechama Leibowitz says: “We are accustomed to reading [this] as the classic description of the fertility and other wonderful qualities of the holy land. But we must not ignore its other implication. The Torah sings the praises of the land to emphasize too the moral dangers and pitfalls that such gifts might bring with them.”

Here are 2 potential pitfalls.

1. We are warned against worshipping other gods, so when we attempt to understand and familiarize ourselves with the “strangers” among us, we have to be careful to select and appreciate the aspects of this foreign culture that enlighten and enlarge us, (everything from Galileo, Roman architecture, and 17<sup>th</sup>-century European music to yoga, acupuncture, and pizza), and yet reject the aspects that will undermine us and corrupt our moral standing.

2. We are warned against hubris; to be careful that “when you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to live in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the Lord your G-d.”

Receiving G-d’s gifts, and enjoying the riches of the land, may lead us to say, (perek 9, pasuk 17) “My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me.” But Moshe tells the people, “Know, then, that it is not for any virtue of yours that the Lord your G-d is giving you this good land to possess; for you are a stiff-necked people.” Believing that we have the power to manipulate the world can lead to our downfall. Hubris, by definition, undermines our relationship with G-d. Arrogance and smugness are based on dismissiveness and disregard for the “Other.” When we act with hubris, we are rejecting our relationship with G-d. Who are we to be dismissive of another human being?

So all along, we’ve been hearing about the wonderful land to which G-d will bring us. But, of course, there’s a big problem. This isn’t just empty, uninhabited land—it’s full of people. Other human beings. They may be idol worshippers, even child sacrificers, and they’re hostile; but they’re people, and they’re

there. And to make things more complicated, almost immediately after we hear about the land, we hear this:

Perek 7, pasuk 16: “You shall destroy all the peoples that the Lord your G-d delivers to you, showing them no pity.” Perek 7, pasuk 24: “You shall obliterate their name from under the heavens; no man shall stand up to you, until you have wiped them out.” 11: 23: This seems to be in direct opposition to what we’ve just been told--“You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” I am not sure what to make of these statements; I find them very troubling; but that will be a subject for another d’var Torah. In the meantime, I think this is another warning: History shows that those who have been oppressed frequently become worse oppressors when they acquire power; we are thus cautioned against becoming oppressors when we have power of another.

We were strangers, or “others”—resident aliens—in Egypt, and suffered under our oppressors. Samson Raphael Hirsch writes that, when we are in a position of power, we should beware of making human rights conditional on anything but “the simple humanity which every human being bears. With any limitation of these human rights, the gate is opened to the whole horror of Egyptian mishandling of human beings.”

I think these concepts can help us answer the question we started with: **What does G-d demand of us?**

We are made in G-d’s image, and therefore we are to emulate G-d, who (perek 10, pasuk 18) “upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger...” Ibn Ezra says: If one person “afflicts” a widow or orphan and the community doesn’t intervene to protect him/her, all will be punished; we all bear responsibility. Anyone who sees a person oppressing society’s most vulnerable and does not come to his/her aid, will also be considered an oppressor.

But exactly how we are to do this isn’t spelled out; in the current situation, there are certainly no easy answers, or even any answers at all. But we know that G-d invites, and expects, moral and ethical debate; so perhaps we are meant *not* to find a definitive answer, but to continually re-examine the question. We will never all agree; but the debate shouldn’t be about what is the “most accurate” or originalist interpretation of the text—instead, it should be about what is the most moral and ethical interpretation. What is the best for the Jews, and for all of humanity? This is also what G-d demands of us.

Among all of the things I’ve read the past month, there are some very disturbing things; and a lot of, I think, useless things that we use to avoid the really difficult questions. For example, there are lists all of our achievements—the Nobel prizes, the amazing Israeli technology, the polio vaccine. But as the Parsha makes clear, we should not hide behind our accomplishments and use them as justification for our supposed “superiority” over the “other;” We aren’t getting the land because we’re so good; our victory is not proof of our virtue. (Perek 9, pasuk 5-6): “It is not because of your righteousness.”

Often, when we are confronted with seemingly impossible situations, we tend to rely on stereotypes to reinforce what we think we know and what we want to believe in order to “justify” our beliefs. We’ve all seen dozens of examples of these stereotypes lately, but here’s one I saw the other day: there’s a picture that’s being circulated on FB of an ugly, toothless old woman, with the caption that she was one of the 72 virgins promised to Muslim martyrs. I find this no less offensive than the stereotypical images used by the Nazis of Jews with hooked noses, grabbing fistfuls of money. How does this help? What does this accomplish? I think it’s worse than useless, because it diverts us from examining the real issues; looking at the actual human beings before us, and looking at ourselves honestly.

But doing this is incredibly hard, because we know that there are many serious and perhaps irreconcilable differences. But to say that’s it, end of conversation—that’s not helpful. **Especially** when it seems futile,

we have to continue searching, talking, not closing our hearts and minds to those of the “other,” to continue to broaden our understanding of him and be mindful of our own power.

We were strangers in Egypt, and thus we have a responsibility toward the strangers among us, regardless of their behavior. Even though we haven’t entirely succeeded in keeping the rules of behavior G-d has laid out for us, he indicates that he isn’t giving up on **us** now or in the future. Our task is to keep trying; we aren’t to give up either. We should continually and continuously aspire to be a people that truly deserves this land and all it represents. The giving of the land should induce a perpetual attitude of gratitude and humility. It’s a gift we didn’t earn. The parsha makes clear this gratitude is best expressed by treating the most vulnerable in society well, especially when we have wealth and power.

There are no clear answers, but we should engage in serious and sophisticated thought and discussion about how to relate to the “strangers” who are in the land, and who will always be in the land; there will always be “others.” Yes, many of them, but not all, are hostile. But what do we really know about the “other” who threatens us? Without knowing, we can’t decrease his “strangeness.” We need to take responsibility for familiarizing ourselves, and to have empathy; then the “alien” is no longer a “stranger.”

This is what G-d demands of us: to engage in a moral debate with Him, to consider and argue and devote our strongest energies to our relationship with the “stranger” among us, especially when we are in a position of power. This is HOW we fulfill the commandment to love and obey G-d.

We don’t just look for easy answers; and we don’t just walk away in disgust or despair when we don’t find the answer. We don’t resort to slogans or shallow simplifications. We live with the tensions, with the uncertainty, with the dissatisfaction of not having found a solution--yet. We keep trying to reach different and ultimately more helpful understandings of our responsibility towards the “strangers” who live among us, adopting the best of their wisdom and values, without compromising our own, keeping in mind that Judaism has survived and flourished exactly by such adaptation and adoption.

As I said at the beginning, I want this to be a conversation. I hope we can keep talking about it.

Shabbat shalom.