

Parshas Mezora 5774

Rabbi Meir Sendor

The Midrash Vayikra Rabba on this week's parsha quotes the beautiful pasuk from Yeshayahu:

ישעיהו פרק נז פסוק יט

בורא [נוב] ניב שפתים שלום שלום לרחוק ולקרוב אמר יקוק ורפאתיו:

“He Who creates the expression of the lips: Peace, Peace to the far and the near, says Ha-Shem, and I shall heal him.” R. Moshe Alsheikh notes that Ha-Shem calls first to the Far and then to the Near: His concern is always to bring us close to Him.

And the Midrash invokes this pasuk as expressing the central theme of this week's parsha, parshas Mezora:

ויקרא רבה (וילנא) פרשת מצורע פרשה טז סימן ט

ר' הונא ור' יודן בשם ר' אחא זה מצורע שהיה רחוק ונתקרב אמר ה' ורפאתיו ואסיני ליה לגרמיה

R. Huna and R. Yudan in the name of R. Acha says: “This refers to the Mezora, who was far away and has been brought close, ‘says Ha-Shem, and I will heal him’ – He will heal him Himself.”

The Mezora is someone who has been estranged from the community, for whatever reason, alienated, alone outside the camp – Rachok. The central message of the parsha is to bring him Near. And that Ha-Shem Himself is his healer. As R. Eliezer says in the Mekhilta:

מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל יתרו - מסכתא דעמלק פרשה א

ר' אליעזר אומר: נאמר למשה אני, אני הוא שאמרתי והיה העולם, אני הוא המקרב ולא המרחק, שנאמר +ירמיה כג כג+ האלוה מקרוב אני נאם ה' ולא אלהי מרחוק.

R. Eliezer says: “it is said to Moshe ‘I – I am the one Who spoke the world came to be, I am the one Who brings close and does not push far away.’”

This was the focus of an important meeting last week, sponsored by the generously philanthropic Ruderman Family Foundation and the CJP on Synagogue Inclusion – how to sensitize Jewish communities to welcome and provide for the needs of those who have certain disabilities, special needs or other challenges in their lives. These disabilities can be physical, affecting mobility or the senses such as sight or hearing. These disabilities can be neurological, affecting cognition and communication and behavior. They can be emotional challenges. They

can be age-related issues. They can be gender-related issues. Or there can be other special needs and challenges, of all kinds, temporary or long-standing, that can make a person feel alienated and estranged from the community.

The purpose of the meeting was to get representatives from all the Shuls in the Greater Boston area together to get started brainstorming and brain-swarming (as they now call it) on how to promote greater inclusion. Our own team included Iris, Hershel, Rabbi Saltzman, and Jodi and Ilyse (for Yachad also), and me.

All the speakers pointed out that most Shuls and Schools, well-meaning as we all may be, are not as inclusive as we should be. Twenty percent of the population have disabilities of one kind or another, and Jews with disabilities tend to be less engaged in the community because the community does not provide adequate access or resources.

Three general areas for improvement were discussed. There's basic **architecture**: is the Shul physically accessible to those requiring wheel-chairs or walkers? For instance, right now, even though we are a ground-level Shul, the Bimah requires a step up, and the Aron Kodesh has two steps up. [The Mechitzah orientation is another issue that we also need to address: the front to back arrangement of the men's and women's section is not ideal: we would prefer side-by-side when we get a chance to expand]. And even when you have the right ramps and the wide doorways and remove other access barriers, there are still other kinds of barriers that can remain, less obvious, but still painful. So there are **education** issues: to inform the Kehillah and cultivate a sensitivity towards those who are struggling or feeling unwelcome for whatever reason. And to make sure this is not done in a patronizing and paternalistic way, but in an Inclusive way itself: Inclusion is the goal and Inclusion is the method. And then there is developing **social programming** and resources to increase inclusion and bring everyone closer together, "those who are far and those who are near."

It was an honest meeting, a tough-talking meeting, but ultimately an inspiring meeting. There will be intensive follow-up, and we invite any and all members of our own Kehillah to join an inclusion initiative in our own Shul to work on the physical and educational and social parts of the issue. We will need everyone's help to identify needs and address needs. The Ruderman Foundation offers grants for Shul inclusion projects, and we will apply, but the real work of inclusion starts with becoming more aware and sensitive to those around who are feeling estranged or shut out, in whatever way.

And this is one of the core issues of Torah itself, a moral issue and a spiritual issue. The concern to bring the Mezora back into the community is emblematic – and here the parsha is talking, not about someone whose challenge is not of their own making, such as a congenital disability or one from an injury or illness, but someone who has alienated themselves from the community by negative speech or action – and still, we’re called upon to compassionately work to repatriate and reintegrate them. Throughout Torah, we are called upon to reach out and support the alienated and disenfranchised: the widow, the orphan, the poor, the ill. And as meforshim such as Rav Hirsch point out, even the defining experience of Shibud Mitzrayim and Yeziyas Mizrayim, that we are planning to commemorate in Pesach, which is at the heart of our Jewish Identity, is about this issue, as it says:

שמות פרק כג

(ט) וגר לא תלחץ ואתם ידעתם את נפש הגר כי גרים הייתם בארץ מצרים:

“You shall not oppress the stranger, for you know the soul of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. According to Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, one of the essential purposes of putting us through the Egyptian enslavement was to forge a nation that is compassionate, empathetic and sensitized to the needs of those who are struggling in life: whoever is a stranger in one way or another, because we know what it feels like to be a stranger, and we Jews are the eternal strangers of this world. Torah is all about Inclusion. As the Mekhilta says: “I am the One Who draws close and does not push far away.”

And this is what the prophecy of Yeshayahu is about, when he says:

ישעיהו פרק נז פסוק יט

בורא [נוב] ניב שפתים שלום שלום לרחוק ולקרוב אמר יקוק ורפאתיו:

“He Who creates the expression of the lips: peace, peace, to the far and the near, says Ha-Shem, and I will heal him.” When we bring others near in inclusion we partner in Ha-Shem’s work and work towards the coming of the Moshiach, speedily and in our days.