

## Reflections on *Ki Teitzei*

Yehuda ben Gershom v' Yehudit

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*"You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and, Ha Shem, your God, redeemed you from there. On account of this I command you to do this thing."  
(Deuteronomy 24:18)*

The commentary I offer below moves in three acts. In the first part I attempt to show that there is value to reminding people of their obligations (and this is why Torah phrases things in imperatives and repeats ideas). Second, I want to show that what Torah is teaching is an evolving idea that both inspires and is moved by the social norms of the age (commentary is both how we progress and show that progress). And then lastly I develop the notion that Torah, perhaps Deuteronomy in particular, has presumed a sense of spirituality in which our own pro-social reward circuits are the very real rewards being promised (drawn from a spiritual or mystical reading of the text).

We begin with, "**you** were a slave in Egypt," not "your ancestors were." It would have been sufficient to say ancestors, but the text makes the much stronger and demanding statement that you, the individual reading/hearing was a slave, and you have been redeemed from that slavery. Why is the narrative so intentionally personal, phrased in second person?

I should note that this verse does not get much formal attention. I can find no reference to this verse in the whole of the Talmud. OK, maybe we can't expect Talmud to reference every single verse. Verses repeat themes. The core idea I am focusing on, **you remember**, is also mentioned in Exodus 13:3, Deuteronomy 5:15, 15:15 and 16:12. From Talmud, *Pesachim* 96b.3 does comment on Exodus 13:3, but the focus is unleavened bread. *Chullin* 142a.9 comments on Deuteronomy 5:15 but the focus is remembering the Sabbath. Neither Deuteronomy 15:5 nor 16:12 is referenced in Talmud either. The themes in Torah for those verses are sacrifices and law respectively.

Some of the great rabbis of the past did offer commentary. What I want you to notice is the evolution of ideas that are drawn from the same text over time.

Rabbi Eliezer the Great (1st Century CE) taught that Torah warns against wronging the stranger in 36 different verses, including this one. And Rabbi Nathan the Babylonian (2<sup>nd</sup> Century) commenting on one of the related *parashot* said that: "You shall neither wrong a stranger, nor oppress him; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt, means that one must not taunt one's neighbor about a flaw that one has oneself."

Rashi (11th Century) said: "(God says) On that condition I redeemed you, (namely, on the condition) that you observe My statutes, even if you incur monetary loss in the matter." That seems standard fare, but why remember, not just obey because ancestors were liberated? Rashi tells us observance is the price we pay for that redemption, but does not address the second person wording, you were a slave.

Saforno (16<sup>th</sup> Century) said: "He took note of your desperate situation and dealt with you over and beyond the requirements of justice in order to be able to redeem you." Again we find the idea of reciprocity. Because God did such and such you must do such and such. Still no mention of why the remembering is me personally. As an aside, it seems to me very much like the redemption from slavery was a requirement of justice, not superogatory (good beyond required) as Saforno thought (that reading would be how John Calvin interpreted the passage too, and they did live around the same time).

As we get closer to our time we find another take on it. Reb Hirsch Leib Berlin (19<sup>th</sup> Century) said the deeper meaning has to do with learning compassion and sympathy. Here things get interesting. Was that idea about compassion absent in previous generations or just unstated? I don't really know, but it seems a good illustration of how the evolution of ideas in religion works and how commentary serves contemporary issues.

Around the same time, the great Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler (President of Hebrew Union College from 1903 to 1921) wrote: "Judaism has evolved the idea of the unity of [humanity] as a corollary of its ethical monotheism." And, "...Judaism has offered in its prophetic hope for a Messianic future the guiding idea for the progress of [humanity] in history."

Steven Pinker makes clear in his new book, *The Better Angels of our Nature*, that historically *shalom* – peace and harmony – was elusive. We are historically a violent species and becoming civilized has been a long bloody road. Judaism played an important role helping humanity make progress. Judaism happened to be the religion that articulated moral order as a goal at the time when societies were becoming sophisticated enough to value such a goal. This was a revolutionary idea then because it challenged violence as the foundation of social order. The call to justice remains revolutionary because in its fullest expression Judaism calls for universal solidarity and equality.

Why the emphasis on remembering (not obeying) though? Torah takes pains to remind us that we must value and pursue an ethical social life. We all must remember that we were slaves because the measure of our success as human beings is the degree to which humanity makes progress, moral progress in history. And, importantly, we do make progress. Our day is not the end. We must continue to fight for moral progress until there are no more people left behind.

Gay marriage is legal in the United States, slavery is universally outlawed, and most societies on Earth recognize a fundamental equality between the genders, and thus all humanity. True, these examples are mostly to do with words and the world is filled with ugly deeds. Yet, the Black Lives Matter movement can complain about police violence without the threat of actual lynching. Jews no longer face pogroms. The US Presidency broke the race barrier and is poised to break the glass ceiling. There has been progress.

We must remember because the progress of the past is not sufficient to answer the demands of today. For example, getting the right to vote in America was not the end of the Women's Movement – it was the beginning. We must remember the struggles of the past so that we do not have to repeat them; just as we remember the suffering of the past so that we do not repeat it. Obeying does not produce progress. Remembering allows for an ongoing comparison to illuminate injustices yet unanswered.

Torah, as collective memory, repeats so that we remember. The story we are considering here tells us since we are now free we are obliged. Or put in a more modern idiom: because we have the abilities we owe it to those with the needs; and because we have needs those with abilities owe it to us to help. We sometimes forget that this formula comes with that demand form. The poor can, nay should demand what is necessary, according to Torah. In another voice: "From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs" (Marx got that formulae from somewhere after all).

Here we find the full answer. You are told that you were a slave in Egypt and were redeemed because you have social obligations. The story is set in a context in which the obligation becomes sacred. But what is really being protected by this idea? Some might offer, reverence for *Ha Shem*. There is something more basic to consider. The obligation you have today is current, it affects the society in which you live. The obligation is to be socially useful. Help your society be better. Why? Because *Ha Shem* rescued you and you are paying it forward? OK. Many of us don't believe the stories can, let alone should be read literally. So why remember? Because we need society and society works better when we all contribute. That really is a sacred obligation. Not because of its source but because of its real world importance.

Society is measured by fairness. It is not enough that some people's rights are better secured than others; what ethical life demands is that all rights are respected everywhere. Some might object that this sounds utopian. Yes, it is. Ethics is supposed to be utopian in its goals. "Love thee the stranger," Deuteronomy (10:19) says in some translations. Why? Because that is what decency demands, Torah is teaching. In a modern idiom we think of: "An injury to one is an injury to all!" David Coates, a socialist politician from a hundred years ago (and the 11th Lt. Governor of Colorado) said that. He wasn't Jewish but his ethics were. I remember that I was a slave in

Egypt and though I am free I must empathize and act in solidarity with those who are still enslaved. "No one is free as long as others are oppressed." That line was made famous by Martin Luther King, Jr., but the source is much older and unknown, and sounds Jewish.

"The summons to remember that one was an *eved* [slave] in Egypt as a motivation for compassion with the disadvantaged occurs only in Deuteronomy...." Shalom Carmy wrote in 2009, (*Hebraic Political Studies*, vol. 4, #4). His point was that Deuteronomy is especially valuable as a moral text; where my point is that as a modern interpreter it occurs to him to read the text that way (and this is how human moral progress happens). He goes on to reference verse 5:15, which I pointed out above is one of the corollaries to the verse I am considering. He mentions that Nahmanides' commentary (13<sup>th</sup> Century) presumes empathy in a discussion of slavery in his society. Seeing those slaves rest on the Sabbath reminds people of their own past, is the idea. But in the 1200's! The Dark Ages! That was remarkably advanced moral thinking for its time, and something Judaism should be proud of inspiring.

What I wanted you to notice is that we see moral progress in the development of the commentary itself which reflects evolving moral standards. We see this movement from Talmud talking about ritual obligation, to Nahmanides presuming the text is teaching empathy, to Kohler arguing it is foundational.

That was acts one and two. From here I would like to delve deeper, into a more speculative conclusion. The ancient rabbis developed an interpretative formula they called *PaRDeS*: *Peshat*, *Derash*, *Remez*, and *Sod*. There is the *Peshat* surface level, straight-forward meaning of the text; then the *Derash* hints to something else; the *Remez* is the deep interpretative level; and finally the hidden or mystical *Sod* meaning. The *Peshat* meaning of this verse is what Rashi gives us. Reb Berlin and Shalom Carmy offered the *Derash* of what it points to.

What really matters for a meaningful life is the *Remez level*, the interpreted meaning or explanation (be social, it is good for you) and the deeper *Sod* spirituality of it all.

The *Remez* level is what the first two parts were about. The deepest meaning of the Torah portion is the duty of the ethical life; a spirituality of the ethical life. Torah calls us to a deeply ethical form of life, in which consequences of our actions are always considered and are deeply important. From what we eat to how we dress, our choices in the world matter. We must attend to that, as social beings, equals amongst ourselves. This is the vital gift to humanity that Judaism offers.

There is more though, on the deepest level, which here I will call spirituality. I submit that at the *Sod* level of interpretation, the ethical life is understood as its own form of spirituality. I have written elsewhere that spirituality is akin to love, but in a context or situation that cannot be properly, which is to say literally, reciprocal. We cannot really

love nature, for example, but we can feel an attachment that is called spirituality, a oneness of being that connects me to nature.

*Specifically: Spirituality is the practice of or the experience of reconnecting with something outside of and larger than the self; something that is social, natural and/ or supernatural.*

*Deuteronomy goes on (24:19): The forgotten sheaf not retrieved, "it shall be the alien's and the orphan's and the widow's, so that Ha Shem, your God, will bless you in all your hands' work."*

The Torah has a way of being very specific and today we understand the point to be more allegorical. I do not have a sheaf of anything anywhere to forget or retrieve; yet we do not think that this means the verse does not apply to me. We are being told to share what we can with those in need. We are part of a society and as such we have obligations. And just where is spirituality in all that? In the blessing!

When the Torah says "bless you in all your hands' work" what does that mean to us today? My claim is that this is the spirituality of ethical religion. I can and ought to feel that my giving of myself to help those in need is included in my spirituality. I feel my connection to the universe as mediated through society and history, being a social creature. When I make special contributions to that society – when it is most needed – I feel deeply connected. Ethics is the Torah's spirituality! I am one with the world when I am one with my social world and to maintain that world I must have empathy with those who suffer.

The blessing of my hands' work is the spirituality of ethical life. The feeling of reward that comes from the contribution is that blessing. When I give what is needed I feel powerfully connected to reality, especially social reality. When I receive what is needed I feel connected to reality, especially social reality. Our brains evolved complex reward circuits that respond to these situations so as to encourage pro-social behavior. Torah does not create the reward; it merely points it out to us. The rewards are built into our mammalian nature.

Torah does not tell me to do these things because I would not have that reward if not told, but rather because social existence is precarious. I may not need to be told that I was a slave, but in some sense we all need to be told together. Being part of society can also seem to provide excuses. Someone else will do it; someone else will solve the problem. That just does not work. So Judaism teaches: "It is not your duty to complete the task, but nor are you free to desist" (Pirke Avot 2:21). The collective, we, needs to be told so that the individual, I, does not feel exempted prematurely. So Judaism teaches: "If not now, when?" (Hillel).

In fact, many people think this was a core idea of Fyodor Dostoyevsky. His idea was that recognizing and following our conscience is the experiential core of all religion (what today we call spirituality). I am not sure if I agree that it is the experiential core of all religion, but to the degree all religions emphasize right and wrong he has a point. That he recognized that living the ethical life could be experientially important in and of itself is my point. I am not the first to suggest that living an ethically good life is its own form of spirituality. What I want you to notice is that it is there in Torah.

I remember that I was a slave because that tells me I have to seek justice for those who do not yet have it. I must do what I can to help those in need. But the deeper point is that in the work of caring for needs is the blessing, the reward, the feeling of rewards. I do the work and feel the rewards. They do not come undeservedly, Torah reminds us over and over. People think of that as being a grand statement about free will or God's justice, but really the observation is more basic – we cannot feel the goods, the blessings of being part of society without being an active participant, to the degree we are able.

Religion, like life, is a commitment one makes and from that commitment come rewards, good feelings, blessings (in the traditional idiom); but only because one lives the commitment, does the work, honors the *mitzvot* (in the traditional idiom).

