

Mishpatim 5781 - Who is the “stranger”?

You likely know that there are card games with conversation starter questions, you might even have such a game sitting next to your game of Scrabble, chess, checkers, or even a classic game of Monopoly.

I think that the Torah is the original conversation starter.

Did you know, there are 304,805 letters, 79,976 words, and 5,845 verses in the Torah?

What I love about Torah includes the letters, words, and verses. And what I love about Torah is the questions Torah inspires.

A verse in our parashah Mishpatim this week is:

Exodus 22:20 You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. : וְגֵר לֹא־תוֹנֶה וְלֹא תִלְחָצֶנּוּ כִּי־גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

What questions might you have about this verse? (Take a moment.)

Who is the “stranger”?

What and who is a stranger? Why say you shall not wrong a stranger and then add, or oppress him? Why the second phrase – would not oppress be part of wronging? What is the difference?

Why add, “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt?”

In biblical times, the stranger here is mostly likely a sojourner, someone who is not born of the Israelite tribes, but has come into our community, and resides with us. The stranger is to follow our rules.

But the Rabbis ask, why the two negative instructions – do not wrong, do not oppress, the stranger.

The Talmud teaches us, and the 11<sup>th</sup> century commentator Rashi, comments further, that wronging is with words – we are not to wrong the stranger with our words. And the second prohibition is not to oppress the stranger, this is a monetary wronging.

The reminder, “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” calls us to personalize for ourselves what it is like to be the stranger.

What is it like to be wronged with words? What is it like to be oppressed in such a way that we are harmed monetarily?

The schoolyard banter, “sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me” – is just that – schoolyard banter. Words hurt, and the injury can last a lifetime, and more.

This text from our Torah is called by scholars a section of the Torah called the Covenant Code. The verses within look like a body of laws, but if we look closer, each of the verses requires much more information and qualification before we could see these as laws. Rather, one could argue that these are laws that we must keep in mind if we are to be a holy people, a people who care for one another, and a people who are a community. This is a verse that is speaking not to law, but rather, to moral behavior. We can enforce laws, but we cannot enforce moral behavior.

The stranger who becomes part of our community does so likely because they have been invited, they are part of our Jewish family, even though they may not have been born Jewish. Though the biblical understand of the Hebrew word “ger” is the stranger, it also became known in the early centuries of the common era as the convert.

Hillel the Elder is one of the best-known sages of the Talmud and lived during the first century before the common era, and was a contemporary of Shammai, a sage with strict opinions and whose opinions are juxtaposed in the Talmud with Hillel’s. Hillel is the one who teaches us the original golden rule, via a story related in the Talmud:

A person who was not Jewish came to Shammai and agreed to be converted if he could teach him the entire Torah while standing on one foot. Shammai sent him away, but Hillel welcomed him, saying: “That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah, and the rest is its interpretation. Go study.”<sup>1</sup> This and other stories showing Hillel’s graciousness even in the face of provocation are invoked to justify the teaching of the rabbis that one should be patient like Hillel and not impatient like Shammai.

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<sup>1</sup> From BT, Shabbat 31a

To be a covenantal community, to be holy, to be servants of the Divine, we embrace such verses: “You shall not wrong the stranger, or oppress him...”

It calls us to ask questions, to explore Torah’s words, including who is the stranger? We are all the stranger. We know what it is to be the stranger.

Just because we may have reached a level of comfort and no longer feel like the stranger, this does not mean that we can or should turn a blind eye to the stranger, nor should we be so comfortable to think that we are not the stranger.

This verse, and Hillel’s teaching is more than law. It is a call to the souls within us. It calls us to be giving, open, and connected. It calls us to emerge as more than physical beings, but also spiritual beings. Being human is challenging, we fear the stranger, and prefer the known, but when we reach beyond fear and embrace and nurture qualities within ourselves of faith, openness, patience, and wonder, then we begin to walk the path of being holy souls.

Shabbat shalom,

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