

Dear Chavraya,

The experience of our own exile is meant to be a light to illumine the night of others who live among us as strangers. This week's Torah portion, *Parashat Mishpatim*, is the first non-narrative portion since the very beginning of the Torah. In the very beginning, with *B'reishit*, we learn that every human being is created in the image of God. In the lengthy legal passages of *Mishpatim*, dry until infused with human spirit, practical meaning is given to human equality and what it means to be created in the image of God.

In a God's-eye view of the world and its people, there is no stranger, no "other," only human-beings. We are reminded several times in this week's *parasha* of our own experience as strangers, and of the consequent responsibility that comes through the collective memory of what it was like. It is a memory that has been renewed many times. *You shall not grieve a stranger who has come over to you, or oppress, because you were strangers in the Land of Egypt. And just a little further on, in case it wasn't clear enough the first time, And you shall not impose restrictions upon a stranger – for you know the soul of a stranger because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*

In these times, when hard-heartedness toward the stranger becomes for some a political virtue, the light of Torah refracts through a prism of commentaries reminding us of a common humanity across the spectrum's hue. Rabeynu Bachya calls out from thirteenth century Spain, from the place of his own exile: *One need not ask whether a stranger is of one's own people, but should act with kindness. A person should awaken and expand her or his soul through the attribute of compassion, that he or she will show compassion for all of God's creatures.*

From nineteenth century Germany, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch speaks to our time with stirring words of admonishment and challenge: *The treatment accorded by a state to the aliens living within its jurisdiction is the most accurate indication of the extent to which justice and humanity prevail in that state. Referring to the commandments conveyed in this week's Torah portion, Hirsch continues: They nurture the spirit of equality and humanity in the nation by training the members of that nation to regard themselves, too, as aliens upon the land and soil of God.*

Leaving a continuous narrative strand and unfolding now with commandments, the Torah turns to us and we become the narrative. May our own experience as a people, inform the narrative we create.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor