

Dear Chavraya,

What does it mean to be a people who stood together at Sinai? To pause for long enough to simply consider the question would itself be a glimmer of hope. With growing ferocity, we have been witness in recent time to the abuse and betrayal of our collective legacy in Israel by some of our people who claim to be its truest guardians. How it pains me to speak harshly of even the harshest of our people, but we dare not be silent.

In the past week, one of a series of attempts was made to burn down a Conservative/*Masorti* synagogue in Arad. The depth of hatred in attacks on the New Israel Fund and its chair, former Knesset member, Naomi Chazan, has sent a chill through the Jewish world. The now infamous cartoon depicting Prof. Chazan with a horn coming out of her forehead is brutally reminiscent of Nazi depictions of Jews. And mainstream journalists and politicians get on the attack bandwagon rather than stand up for democracy. And there is the treatment of women at the *Kotel*, and the willingness to relegate women to the back of even some public buses. And the vitriol directed at Israeli human rights groups for defending the rights of Palestinians. And we are witness to the increasing absurdity in the hard-heartedness of those with the power to reject the gift to our people of Jews by choice.

How far away the moment of Sinai, a moment in time as well as space, in which we were gathered, the rabbis say, the soul of every Jew who ever would be, whether by birth or by destiny. The unity of that moment seems surreal. In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Mishpatim*, the people affirm the gift of Torah, *Vaya'an kol ha'am kol echad/And the entire people answered with one voice and said: 'all the words that God has spoken we will do/na'aseh.'* *Mishpatim* marks a watershed in the flow of Torah. From the very beginning of the Torah until this portion there has been a continuously unfolding narrative. With this portion, the thread of narrative pauses as the first lengthy enumeration of laws is given. The word *mishpatim* is understood to refer primarily to social legislation or ordinances. Beyond narrative, the ideal spirit of our people becomes manifest through law and the nature of a society envisioned through the spirit and practice of justice and kindness. We find in this first major enumeration of laws the spirit of who we are meant to be, and a warning against the kind of gross violation of that spirit which masquerades today as love of Zion and the Jewish people.

In the framework it gives to social legislation, the Torah speaks to our hearts, encouraging, reminding us who we are: *and you shall not oppress a stranger – for you know the soul of the stranger/y'datem et nefesh ha'ger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.* From this, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch in nineteenth century Germany draws a warning, *See to it that when you have a state of your own you do not make the rights of any foreigner in your midst dependent upon anything other than the pure human quality inherent in every person. As soon as you abridge this basic human right you open the door to all the abominations of tyranny and abuse that were practiced in the land of Egypt.* The corners of our fields are to be left for those in need to gather food, the most vulnerable, the orphan, the widow, and the stranger. Interpersonally, we are called to transcend hate, obliged to turn aside to help even an enemy raise up a fallen beast of burden. The Sabbath and the

Sabbatical year are to remind us of human equality, that we dwell together upon God's earth, and that all are entitled to rest from their labors.

The purpose of the commandments is to sensitize our hearts. The "Sefer Ha'chinuch/the Book of Education," as in the Godly way of life, a medieval work whose humble author did not leave a hint of personal identity, writes that the purpose of the commandments is *to teach our souls to love the good/l'lamed nafshenu le'e'hov ha'tov*. Drawing on a Talmudic discussion that cites compassion as an identifying trait of a Jew, the Sefer Ha'chinuch describes Israel as *rachmanim b'nei rachmanim/compassionate children of compassionate ancestors*, saying that as a result of that calling, *it is becoming for them to do kindness with all creatures*. The Sefer Ha'chinuch goes on to speak of someone who fails to show compassion as one who "teaches their heart to be cruel," then offering a powerful indictment and warning, *and slowly such a person bears witness against him or herself that they are not of the children of Israel, for they (the children of Israel) are rachmanim b'nei rachmanim/compassionate children of compassionate ancestors*. The Sefer Ha'chinuch casts the tiresome debate of who is a Jew in an old/new light.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor