

Parashat Mishpatim 5773 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

We have just left Egypt, and immediately the exhortation to remember. The sting of the lash still upon our backs, there is singular purpose to our remembering, that we not become instruments of oppression ourselves. Beginning so soon, in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Mishpatim*, the Torah reminds us thirty-six times that we were slaves in Egypt. Each time, the reminder immediately follows a commandment not to oppress or cause harm to the vulnerable among us. Looking ahead to freedom, toward which our first steps have just been taken, the Torah points the way to what freedom is meant to be, inclusive, not just for us, *But you shall not grieve a stranger who has come over to you, or oppress, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt/ki gerim he'yitem b'erezt Mitzrayim; you shall not let any widow or orphan feel their dependent state/kol almanah v'yatom lo t'anun*. Throughout the Torah, the stranger, the widow, the orphan represent the most vulnerable of society.

Thirty-six times we are told to remember. Because we know in our own souls the pain of oppression, we are told in this portion, *for you know the soul of the stranger/v'atem y'datem et nefesh ha'ger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt*. That knowing, and responding in accord with it is the measure of a just and humane society. Regarding the stranger as representing all who are vulnerable, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes from 19th century Germany, "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." Emphasizing all of the vulnerable, Rabbenu Bachya writes from Medieval Spain that to the stranger we are to join the widow and the orphan/*v'tzaref ha'almanah v'hayatom*, all of the vulnerable, reminding us how easy it is to fall into the ways of avoidance and oppression: *it is easy to cause them harm and pain...; therefore a person needs to take care toward them, to cause good and to cause kindness with them whether with one's body or one's monetary means*.

In a powerful comingling of themes, this Shabbos of *Parashat Mishpatim* is also *Shabbat Sh'kalim*, the Shabbos of the Shekels. On this Shabbos, we are reminded that each one is to give half a shekel for the upkeep of the Temple. It is a very small amount of money that even the poorest can afford. That all are to give equally, "the rich shall not give more and the poor shall not give less," underscores that all are given an equal place in society. From the 19th century, the Torah commentator known as Malbim writes of the lesson in the half shekel: *this teaches of their union, that every individual is but half, and not a complete entity, that each needs to join with another until becoming as a complete entity*.

In the cycle of our journey through Torah, these themes that underscore our responsibility one for another formed the context and content of meetings in the past week of the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization. The current campaign undertaken by the GBIO, in which several Nehar Shalom members are actively involved, is to help direct efforts to raise new state revenue and to establish priorities for its distribution based on the most pressing needs of the people of the Commonwealth. Reminding us of what it means to be a commonwealth, in the way for us of the half-shekel, I share with you a beautiful op-ed/sermon/*d'rasha* written by Rev. Burns Stanisfield and Rev. Stephen Kendrick of the GBIO. In their reflection on a sermon of the first governor of the Commonwealth, John Winthrop, is the essence of our own remembering that we were slaves in Egypt and that we are each but half a shekel. It is to create a society in which none are marginalized or left out, a society that is whole because each one is present and accounted for, each one making the other whole.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor

"MASS. NEEDS NEW AND FAIR REVENUE"
By Burns Stanfield and Stephen Kendrick
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In 1630, John Winthrop crafted a sermon on board the *Arbella* for an early wave of Massachusetts Bay colonists from England. "We must be knit together . . . in brotherly affection," and "make others' conditions our own," he preached. Invoking Moses, Jesus, and the prophets, he held high for the colony an image from the Sermon on the Mount: "We shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us."

For almost four centuries, that vision has continued to animate American public discourse; and today, Winthrop's words are pertinent to the renewed debate on raising new revenue in Massachusetts. We faith leaders in the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization congratulate Governor Patrick for initiating this debate, and we call upon our fellow citizens to be guided once again by our first governor's vision of a Commonwealth grounded in justice, mercy, and provision for future generations.

Winthrop was speaking to a company of like-minded English Puritans, of course; but his core message resonates across the lines that often divide us. Our two churches work with Muslims, Jews, and Christians of all stripes on such issues as housing, education,

and access to health care. We commit time and talent to enhancing this “city upon a hill.” And today, that work draws us directly into the debate on revenue.

Massachusetts has a problem. Between 1998 and 2002, the Commonwealth implemented income tax cuts that now cost us \$2.5 billion each year in lost revenue. (“Taxachusetts” we are no more, ranking 25th among states in our per capital state and local tax burden.) We all know the appeal of tax cuts; but sustained cuts to the marrow of our community leave us weak for the future and diminished as a beacon of opportunity. Over the last decade, adjusting for inflation, funding has decreased 45 percent for local aid, 31 percent for higher education, and 25 percent for public health. The current budget path also leaves little room for needed improvements in transportation. We are deferring needed investments, neglecting posterity, loosening our hold on that vision where “we are knit together” in kindred affection.

Deferred investment means denied prosperity. Massachusetts is successfully transforming its economy, but that success means little to the many in our state with inadequate access to education and workforce development. We’ve seen, for example, a 16 percent increase in the poverty rate. And while Massachusetts has continued to do well in national educational testing, there continues to be a stubborn achievement gap.

For Winthrop, the operative image was a shipwreck. His Arbella sermon warned fellow colonists of the seductive appeal of “superfluities” and seemingly profitable short-sightedness. Breaching the principles of mercy, justice, and community risk ruin. Our sacred commission — and our best hope — is to “provide for our posterity” and cast an eye toward future generations.

And it is precisely for our children and grandchildren that we make our call for new and fair revenue.

Both of us have stories of a greater community coming together to make possible our own thriving. Taxpayers made it possible for us to go to school, to get loans for college, to take the subway for internships and jobs, to live in homes protected by firefighters and police. Indeed, with all of us, individual stories bear witness to the power of a community which takes the long view and provides for posterity.

So now is the time.

Now is the time to engage in a rigorous debate about revenue reform in Massachusetts. Now is the time to tend to those deferred investments like education and transportation that will make it possible for our grandchildren to thrive. Now is the time to recall the

vision of an early settler who imagined a community where we “make others’ conditions our own.” Now is the time to provide for our posterity.

As people of varied faiths, we in Massachusetts nonetheless share a common birthright from that passionate Puritan on the Arbella: a vision for community. May that vision inform this critical debate, and may we stand as a city upon a hill.

The eyes of all people are upon us.

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