

Dear Chavraya,

As a framework for living, we encounter life through Torah, and so we speak of *Torat Chayyim*, a Torah of Life. Not every passage uplifting, easily abused and drained of innermost spirit, the essence of Torah is an affirmation of life. And so life plays out, events of the moment refracted, light bending to help us see more deeply into the dark, inner truths illumined in order to remind with each week's reading. In the context of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Ki Tetze*, as all connections made are meant to be, values and hopes for a just society offer a vision through which to remember Ted Kennedy.

Do not withhold anything from a day laborer who is poor and needy, whether of your people or of the stranger that lives in your land, within your gates. On the day the work is done shall you give the laborer's wage, and do not let the sun go down upon it, because the worker is poor....

You shall not twist the justice due to an orphaned stranger, and you shall not take a widow's garment as security. You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt....

When you reap your harvest in your field, and you forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to take it; it shall be for the stranger, the orphan and the widow.... When you beat your olive tree..., that [which] you have left behind shall be for the stranger, the orphan and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not pick the unripe grapes that you have left behind; it shall be for the stranger, the orphan and the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt.

The call for justice and compassion is legislated as commandment, lest our hearts narrow and we forget. Echoing through the text, thirty-six times throughout the Torah, the stranger, the orphan and the widow represent the weakest of society. There is no distinction among those in need, whether home-born or recently arrived, each created in God's image. Of caring for the stranger, Rabbenu Bachya, thirteenth century Spanish commentator, writes: *Oseh chesed im ha'kol/Act kindly toward everyone*. Referring to the legendary kindness shown by Job, Rabbenu Bachya says that Job did not ask whether a stranger was of his own people, and then we are told: *So a person should awaken and expand their soul through the attribute of compassion, that they be merciful to all creatures.*

Parashat Ki Tetze opens with the specter of war, *Ki tetze lamilchamah al oyvecha/when you go forth to war against your enemies*. In much Chassidic teaching, these words are turned on their head, understood as referring to inner struggle, rather than to the clash of arms. In this way of reading the text, the Slonimer Rebbe offers poignant psychological insight, explaining that "against your enemies" should be understood as *your own unique enemy/ha'oyev ha'm'yuchad shelcha*. The Slonimer goes on, sharing the essential teaching that weaves through all of his work: *Every person has their own unique task that they need to fulfill, and for that purpose has each one come into the world*. The parallel is clear between "unique personal enemy" and "unique personal task" / *tafkid m'yuchad*. We each have our own personal "demons" to battle with and transcend, freeing us then to accomplish all the good for which we came into this world.

In all he did for the “stranger, the orphan and the widow,” building bridges among people and nations, that someday war itself be turned upon its head, Senator Kennedy fulfilled the unique and holy task that was his. *Y’hi zichrono liv’racha*/May his memory be a blessing.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor