

Mishpatim 5779 After Enlightenment...

There's a Buddhist saying that goes:

After enlightenment...the laundry.

Last week we read once again of how our ancestors stood at Sinai - and I spoke about how we, too, can understand ourselves as still standing in the field of revelation. But after the lightening and the thunder, after the extreme closeness to God that was created within that experience, what happens?

The short answer is that the people continue to receive Torah - the opening words of this week's Torah portion, *Ve-eleh ha-mishpatim*, these are the laws which Moses is to put before the Children of Israel. Covering both civil and criminal matters, they deal with the judicial system, damage to property, land stewardship, looking after the vulnerable, intentional and unintentional homicide, assault and battery, the taking of pledges, the calendar and more.

Which is the very first law, after the Ten Utterances, to be taught to the people? This one:

*When you acquire a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years
In the seventh year he shall go free, without payment.
If he came single, he shall leave single; if he had a wife, his wife shall leave with him.
If his master gave him a wife and she has borne him children
The wife and the children shall belong to the master
And he shall leave alone.*

*But if the slave declares, 'I love my master and my wife and children,
I do not wish to go free,'
His master shall take him before the judges.
He shall be brought to the door or the doorpost
And his master shall pierce his ear with an awl
And he shall then remain a slave for life.*

In the Sisterhood class this week we discussed this set of rules at some length. Generally the class felt this was not the greatest of beginnings! Didn't God just say that the people have been brought out of the house of bondage? If so, why begin with slaves? - and particularly, a situation in which the slave has an option to agree to lifetime indenture - and that at the price of leaving wife and children behind. How is a law like this one supposed to form the basis of a fair legal system? And why is it placed first? Surely the purpose of a new legal code is to show us where we are going and not remind us of where we have been!

But at the same time, this text is an opportunity - what should we do with a piece of Torah that doesn't sit well with us, that is more in the category of laundry than the category of enlightenment?

I think the first step is just to admit to ourselves that this is a challenging text. It doesn't sit well with our current sensibilities. Particularly not, given that we live where we live. And I think we have to own and admit that first.

But then I'm reminded of an analogy that I was taught by a student from my Torah class in my previous shul, an actress. (Let me put that class in conversation with the Sisterhood class...) She pointed out that the study of Torah is rather like Shakespeare is for an actor. If the line doesn't play right, we don't blame Shakespeare for writing it badly. Instead, we see how we can deepen our relationship with it and try to get at what it really has to teach us.

We do that by questioning the text.

Question One: why talk to us about slavery?

There's a leadership proposition that I've come across in various contexts which suggests that it's best to meet people where they are. So arguably, that's exactly what God is doing. After four hundred years of enslavement, the people might not be ready to hear about what goes to make a free society - and even if they were ready, they might not yet be able to imagine themselves as free. So the law code begins with an experience with which they are familiar - serving a master.

Question Two - why limit people's freedom?

Regardless of our answer to Question One, we still have a situation in which there is an assumption that people's freedom will be limited. However, Dr Lieber, in the Etz Hayyim commentary in the humash, takes pains to point out that the limitation is never intended to be permanent. On the contrary: it is clear that it is to end automatically at the end of seven years - a kind of Shabbat that, unlike an ordinary Shabbat, is intended to last forever. Our commentators notice that a slave who wants to remain indentured is marked on his ear - the ear that heard the words of revelation. He is brought the doorpost to remind him of the doorposts that were marked for the Israelites on the night they became free. All this is to make it clear to him that a door was opened for him and it was he who refused to go through it.

And this brings us to Question Three: what does all this have to teach us? The first thing to notice is what we just said - that slavery is a choice; or rather, continued slavery is a choice. If Torah continues to be relevant to our daily lives, how does this idea play for us in the time we are now living? If we read it metaphorically, an answer emerges.

Because even though we are not physically enslaved, there are still masters that we serve. Are we in thrall to a particular idea that requires we see the world only one way? Do we behave in a way that has us constantly chasing the newest, most fashionable, most expensive thing? Are we the victims of our fixed habits, the sins for which we constantly seem to be saying 'ashamnu' but which we feel powerless to change? If so, then we too are like the Israelite slave. And we have the same choice as he did - to set ourselves free or to keep ourselves indentured. In the system that the Torah sets out, our free will includes the choice about whether to be free in the first place.

Does this sound familiar? It should:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. —

The Torah adds the idea that claiming these rights is still our choice - in every day, in every moment.

So to return to the idea with which we began: what comes after revelation and why? This set of rules may not be transformational, and does present challenges to us. But after enlightenment comes the laundry - always. And as we have discovered, even the laundry can teach us something.