

Lesson 4 - Humility, Memory, Love, Destiny, and Education

Humility

Here is a reading said after the evening service on Saturday night as Shabbat comes to an end. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty, and awe-inspiring God, who shows no favoritism and accepts no bribe. He upholds the cause of the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing. (Deut. 10:17–18)

The juxtaposition of the two verses – the first about God’s supremacy, the second about His care for the low and lonely – could not be more striking. The Power of powers cares for the powerless. The Infinitely Great shows concern for the small.

It is repeated in the Prophets, as it says: “So says the High and Exalted One, who lives forever and whose name is Holy: I live in a high and holy place, but also with the contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite” (Is. 57:15).

It is stated a third time in the Writings: “Sing to God, make music for His name, extol Him who rides the clouds – God is His name – and exult before Him” (Ps. 68:5). Immediately afterwards it is written: “Father of the fatherless and judge of widows, is God in His holy habitation” (68:6).

It is there to remind us that, as the day of rest ends and we return to our weekday concerns, we should not be so caught up in our own interests that we forget others less favorably situated. **To care only for ourselves and those immediately dependent on us is not “the way of God.”**

For the tercentenary service in 2001, Prince Charles came to the synagogue. There he met members of the community as well as leaders of Anglo-Jewry. What was impressive was that he spent as much time talking to the young men and women who were doing security duty as he did to the great and good of British Jewry. For security reasons, people volunteer to stand guard at communal events – part of the work of one of our finest organizations, the Community Security Trust. Often, people walk past them, hardly noticing their presence. But Prince Charles did notice them, and made them feel as important as anyone else on that glittering occasion. **Greatness is humility.**

Consider most philanthropists, where there were none who knew the names of the children of the waiters at the hotel where they stayed, none who cared more for those whom others hardly noticed or who gave help more quietly, more effectively, more humanly. **Greatness is humility.** This idea – counter-intuitive, unexpected, life-changing – is one of the great contributions of the Torah to Western civilization and it is set out in the words of Parashat Ekev, when Moses told the people about the:

"God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty, and awe-inspiring God" whose greatness lay not just in the fact that He was creator of the universe and shaper of history, but that "He upholds the cause of the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing."

Physically, the taller you are the more you look down on others. Morally, the reverse is the case. The more we look up to others, the higher we stand. For us, as for God, greatness is humility.

Once again we find Yeshua quoting (actually paraphrasing) Deuteronomy in the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 5: Now *when he** saw the crowds, he went up the mountain and *after he** sat down, his disciples approached him. ² And opening his mouth he began to teach them, saying,

³ *Blessed are* the poor in spirit,
because theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ *Blessed are* the ones who mourn,
because they will be comforted.

⁵ *Blessed are* the meek,
because they will inherit the earth.

⁶ *Blessed are* the ones who hunger and thirst *for* righteousness,
because they will be satisfied.

⁷ *Blessed are* the merciful,
because they will be shown mercy.

⁸ *Blessed are* the pure in heart,
because they will see God.

⁹ *Blessed are* the peacemakers,
because they will be called sons of God.

¹⁰ *Blessed are* those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
because theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ *Blessed are you* when they insult you and persecute *you* and say all kinds of evil things against you, lying on account of me.

¹² Rejoice and be glad, because your reward *is* great in heaven, for in the *same* way they persecuted the prophets before you.

Memory

This is the ideal:

Observe the commands of the Lord your God, walking in His ways and revering Him. For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land – a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills. When you have eaten and are satisfied, bless the Lord your God for the good land He has given you. (Deut. 8:6–10)

And this is the danger:

Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe His commands, His laws, and His decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery... You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms His covenant, which He swore to your forefathers, as it is today. (Deut. 8:11–17)

The two passages follow directly on from one another. They are linked by the phrase **"when you have eaten and are satisfied,"** and the contrast between them is a fugue between the verbs "to remember" and "to forget."

Moses' argument is brilliant and counter-intuitive. **The real challenge is not poverty but affluence, not slavery but freedom, not homelessness but home.** The real test of a nation is not if it can survive a crisis but if it can survive the lack of a crisis. Can it stay strong during times of ease and plenty, power and prestige? The nation, its early battles over, becomes strong. Some of its members grow rich. They become lax, self-indulgent, over-sophisticated, decadent. They lose their sense of social solidarity. They no longer feel it their duty to care for the poor, the weak, the marginal, the losers. They begin to feel that such wealth and position as they have is theirs by right.

The Italian political philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) described a similar cycle: People, he said, "first sense what is necessary, then consider what is useful, next attend to comfort, later delight in pleasures, soon grow dissolute in luxury, and finally go mad squandering their estates." Affluence begets decadence.

Moses, however, did more than prophesy and warn. He also taught how the danger could be avoided, and here too his insight is as relevant now as it was then. He spoke of the vital significance of memory for the moral health of a society. The guardian of conscience is memory. Time and again the verb *zakhor*, "remember," resonates through Moses' speeches in Deuteronomy: Remember that you were slaves in Egypt...therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Shabbat day. (Deut. 5:15)

Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years...(Deut. 8:2)

Remember this and never forget how you provoked the Lord your God to anger in the desert...

(Deut. 9:7)

Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam along the way after you came out of Egypt. (Deut. 24:9)

Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. (Deut. 25:17)

Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past. (Deut. 32:7)

The American scholar Jacob Neusner once wrote:

Civilization hangs suspended, from generation to generation, by the gossamer strand of memory. If only one cohort of mothers and fathers fails to convey to its children what it has learned from its parents, then the great chain of learning and wisdom snaps. If the guardians of human knowledge stumble only one time, in their fall collapses the whole edifice of knowledge and understanding.

The politics of free societies depends on the handing on of memory. That was Moses' insight, and it speaks to us with undiminished power today.

Love

Something implicit in the Torah from the very beginning becomes explicit in the book of Deuteronomy. God is the God of love. More than we love Him, He loves us.

To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth, and everything in it. Yet the Lord set His affection on your ancestors and loved them, and He chose you, their descendants, above all the nations – as it is today. (Deut. 10:14–15)

“Because He loved your ancestors and chose their descendants after them, He brought you out of Egypt by His Presence and His great strength” (Deut. 4:37).

The book of Deuteronomy is saturated with the language of love. The root A-H-V appears in Exodus twice, in Leviticus twice (both in Lev. 19), in Numbers not at all – and in Deuteronomy twenty-three times. **Deuteronomy is a book about societal beatitude and the transformative power of love. Nothing could be more misleading and invidious than the contrast between Christianity as a religion of love and forgiveness and Judaism as a religion of law and retribution. The idea of forgiveness as opposed to mere appeasement was born in Judaism.**

When the New Testament speaks of love it does so by direct quotation from Leviticus: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (19:18) and Deuteronomy: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might” (6:5).

As philosopher Simon May puts it in his book, *Love: A History*: **The widespread belief that the Hebrew Bible is all about vengeance and “an eye for an eye,” while the Gospels supposedly invent love as an unconditional and universal value, must therefore count as one of the most extraordinary misunderstandings in all of Western history. For the Hebrew Bible is the source not just of the two love commandments but of a larger moral vision inspired by wonder for love’s power.**

“If love in the Western world has a founding text, that text is Hebrew.”

The biblical “love of one’s neighbor” is a very special form of love, a unique development of the Judaic religion and unlike any to be encountered outside it. It is a supremely altruistic love, for to love one’s neighbor as oneself means always to put oneself in his place and to act on his behalf as one would naturally and selfishly act on one’s own.

What is radical about this idea is that, first, the Torah insists, against virtually the whole of the ancient world, that the elements that constitute reality are neither hostile nor indifferent to humankind. We are here because Someone wanted us to be, One who cares about us, watches over us, and seeks our well-being. Second, the love with which God created the universe is not just divine. It is to serve as the model for us in our humanity. **God created the world in love and forgiveness and asks us to love and forgive others. I believe that to be the most profound moral idea in human history. God does not forgive human beings until human beings learn to forgive one another.**

Yeshua was quite outspoken on the exact mechanism by which people’s sins are forgiven. The mechanism Yeshua taught for the forgiveness of sins is simple, very specific, and right out of Deuteronomy . He taught the *self-liberation from spiritual bondage* to the consequences of our sins, by releasing others from the consequences of their sins against us. **The forgiveness of sins resides solely with the responsibility of the individual person and is not the product of any external intervention.**

Yeshua taught the practice of Shalach, the spiritual practice of forgiveness and non-retaliation. The Aramaic word Shalach as used by Yeshua means liberation or release from the consequences of sin. A person who intentionally harms another creates an injustice that sets up a destructive existential imbalance in nature that is beyond their control to amend. In other words, you can’t un-rape or un-kill somebody. In Judaism sin generates **hub**, an Aramaic word meaning the same as karma.

Love in and of itself – real love, personal and passionate, the kind of love that suffuses much of the prophetic literature as well as the Song of Songs, the greatest love song in Tanakh, as opposed to the detached, generalized love called agape which we associate with ancient Greece – is not sufficient as a basis for society. It can divide as well as unite.

In other words, in Judaism love and justice go hand in hand. Love without justice leads to rivalry, and eventually to hate. Justice without love is devoid of the humanizing forces of compassion and mercy. We need both. It is born here in the book of Deuteronomy, the book of law-as-love and love-as-law.

It should be noted that the victim is the only one who has the spiritual power to end the ancient cycle of retaliation. With Shalach the cycle of karmic retaliation is put on hold and the bondage of sin is loosened for both victim and offender. By releasing an enemy from the consequences of his injustice against you, two people are liberated from sin. Desire for vengeance becomes a self-destructive poison in the heart of the victim, but a compassionate desire for the liberation of all beings from bondage to evil is healing.

The concept of Shalach, as expressed by Yeshua, is deeply embedded into the Lord's Prayer as seen in Yeshua's commentary on the prayer in Matthew.

Matthew 6:9-15, You, therefore, pray like this:

'Our Father in heaven! May your Name be kept holy.

May your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.

Give us the food we need today.

Forgive us what we have done wrong, as we too have forgiven those who have wronged us.

And do not lead us into hard testing, but keep us safe from the Evil One. For kingship, power and glory are yours forever. Amen.'

For if you forgive others their offenses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others their offenses, your heavenly Father will not forgive yours.

Education

What is the secret of Jewish survival throughout the ages under conditions that were often those of exile, dispersion, homelessness, powerlessness, and persecution? Jews survived because they set as their highest priority handing on their heritage to the next generation. They placed education at the very heart of faith. Their heroes were teachers, their citadels were houses of study, and their passion learning and the life of the mind. But if one thing is clear from the Torah's narrative thus far, it is that the transformation of a people takes a long time. If any change in the human condition takes longer than a generation, education becomes fundamental. We need to hand on our memories, values, ideals, laws, and customs to our children, and they to theirs, if each generation is to continue the journey to a destination not yet reached.

It was not until 1870 that Britain – then the most advanced and prosperous in the world – introduced universal compulsory education. Jews had done so eighteen centuries before. More recently a gathering of Jews was convened at Valladolid, Spain, in 1432. It ordained a series of taxes on meat, wine, weddings, and circumcisions, to raise funds for public education:

We also ordain that every community of fifteen householders [or more] shall be obliged to maintain a qualified elementary teacher to instruct their children in Scripture. They shall provide him with sufficient income for a living in accordance with the number of his dependents. The parents shall be obliged to send their children to that teacher, and each shall pay him in accordance with his means. If this revenue from the parents should prove inadequate, the community shall be obliged to supplement it with an amount necessary for his livelihood in accordance with the time and the place.

Until modern times, there was no parallel to this Jewish insistence on education as the fundamental right and duty of every person, every child.

The Mesopotamians built ziggurats, the Egyptians built pyramids, the Greeks built the Parthenon, and the Romans the Coliseum. Jews built schools. That is why they are still here.

Destiny

The most famous phrase of all describing Israel is, a land “flowing with milk and honey”. The honey referred to, he notes, is not from bees but from the date palm. Israel was famed for its grapes and wine. But the biblical yayin, “wine,” standardly refers to red wine. *Ĥalav* – the word we translate as “milk” means white wine, and is called *ĥalav* because of its milky appearance.

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land – a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey, a land where bread will not be scarce, and you will lack nothing. (Deut. 8:7–8)

In Mesopotamia and Egypt, the most powerful reality was the regularity of nature, the succession of the seasons, which seemed to mirror the slow revolution of the stars. Israel, by contrast, was a land without regularities. There was no guarantee that next year would be like this, or this year like last, no certainty that the rain would fall and the earth yield its crops or the trees their fruit. Those who lived, or live, in Israel exist in a state of radical contingency. They can never take the future for granted. They depend on something other than nature. David Ben-Gurion knew this. He once said: “In Israel, in order to be a realist, you must believe in miracles.”

Israel’s existence as a nation in its land was never secure. That is the nature of Jewish faith – not security but the courage to live with insecurity, knowing that life is a battle. It was the land where people were lifted beyond themselves because, time and again, they would have to believe in something and someone beyond themselves.