

Lesson 6 - Freedom, Virtue, Dignity, Insecurity, and Joy

The Politics of Freedom

Having set out the broad principles of the covenant, Moses now turns to the details, which extend over many chapters. The long review of the laws that will govern Israel in its land begins and ends with Moses posing a momentous choice.

See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse – the blessing if you listen to the commands of the Lord your God that I am giving you today, the curse if you do not listen to the commands of the Lord your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods, which you have not known. (Deut. 11:26–28)

And here is how he puts it at the end:

See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil.... I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your children may live. (Deut. 30:15, 19)

If humans are free, then they need a free society within which to exercise that freedom. The book of Deuteronomy represents the first attempt in history to create a free society. There is not a word of nationalism in the conventional sense. Moses does not tell the people that they are great. He tells them that they have been rebellious and that they have sinned. But if we truly believe in God, not God as a philosophical abstraction, but God in whose handwriting our history has been written, God to whom we pledged allegiance at Mount Sinai, God who is our only sovereign – then we can do great things. These things are great not in conventional terms, but in moral terms. For if all power, all wealth, all might belong to God, then none of these things can rightfully set us apart one from another.

Moses insists on three things:

First, we are free. The choice is ours. Blessing or curse? Good or evil? Faithfulness or faithlessness? You decide. The sovereignty of God does not take away human responsibility. Do not blame others or chance or ill-fortune for your defeat. The choice is yours; the responsibility is yours alone.

Second, we are collectively responsible. The phrase “All Israelites are responsible for one another” is rabbinic but the idea is already present in the Torah. This too is radical. This is the origin of the American phrase “We, the people.” Unlike all other nations in the ancient world and most today, the people of the covenant did not believe that their destiny was determined by kings, emperors, a royal court, or a governing elite. It was and is determined by each of us as moral agents, conjointly responsible for the common good.

Third, it is a God-centred politics. There was no word for this in the ancient world so Josephus had to coin one. He called it "theocracy." That is not what Israel was. Again, an American phrase comes to mind. Israel was "one nation under God." If any single word does justice to the vision of Deuteronomy it is not theocracy but nomocracy, "the rule of laws, not men."

Biblical Israel is the first example in history of an attempt to create a free society. It is a beautiful, powerful, challenging idea. **If God is our only sovereign, then all human power is delegated, limited, subject to moral constraints.** Jews were the first to believe that an entire nation could govern itself in freedom and equal dignity. **God does not do it for us but He teaches us how it is done.** As Moses said: The choice is ours.

The Untranslatable Virtue

The principle of tzedaka:

If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your poor brother. Rather, be open-handed and freely lend him sufficient for his need in that which he lacks.... Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed towards your brothers and towards the poor and needy in your land." (Deut. 15:7–11)

The broad principle of tzedaka lies at the heart Judaism's understanding of mitzvot bein adam le'havero, the duties we have to other people. The "way of the Lord" is defined here by two words, tzedaka and mishpat. They are both forms of justice, but are quite different in their logic. **Mishpat means retributive justice.** It refers to the rule of law, through which disputes are settled by right rather than might. A law-governed society is a place of mishpat. But mishpat alone cannot create a good society. **To it must be added tzedaka, distributive justice.** One can imagine a society which fastidiously observes the rule of law, and yet contains so much inequality that wealth is concentrated in the hands of the few, and many are left without the most basic requirements of a dignified existence.

the Torah sets out its program of distributive justice in great detail in terms of an agrarian order. There was the seventh (Jubilee) year, when debts were cancelled. In the seventh year of service, Jewish slaves went free. There was the Jubilee in which ancestral lands returned to their original owners. **The Torah established the first form of what in the twentieth century came to be known as a welfare state**, with one significant difference. It did not depend on a state. It was part of society, implemented not by power but by moral responsibility, not by governments but by individuals in local communities.

Tzedaka refers to more than gifts of produce. It includes gifts of money, the medium of exchange in all advanced societies whatever their economic base. That is why in post-biblical times, when Israel was no longer a nation in its own land, and most of its people no longer lived and worked on farms, tzedaka took on new forms, as gifts of money or food or other resources. The implementation changed but the principle remained the same.

If we seek to understand what makes a civilization distinctive, the best place to look is at the words that are untranslatable. **Tzedaka cannot be translated because it joins together two concepts that in other languages are opposites, namely, charity and justice.** Suppose, for example, that I give someone \$100. Either he is entitled to it or he is not. If he is, then my act is a form of justice. If he is not, it is an act of charity. Tzedaka is therefore an unusual term, because it means both.

The idea of tzedaka arises from the theology of Judaism, which insists on the difference between possession and ownership. Ultimately, all things are owned by God, Creator of the world. What we possess, we do not own – we merely hold it in trust for God. **In Judaism, however, because we are not owners of our property but merely guardians on God's behalf, we are bound by the conditions of trusteeship, one of which is that we share part of what we have with others in need.**

The nearest English equivalent to tzedaka is the phrase that came into existence alongside the idea of a welfare state, namely, social justice. The idea that no one should be without the basic requirements of existence, and that those who have more than they need must share some of that surplus with those who have less. The prophet Jeremiah says of King Josiah, ["The Lord judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is this not to know Me? says the Lord" \(Jer. 22:16\).](#) **To know God is to act with justice and compassion, to recognize His image in other people, and to hear the silent cry of those in need.**

The Psychology of Dignity

Judaism conceives poverty not only in material terms, that the poor lack the means of sustenance. It also sees it in psychological terms. Poverty humiliates. It robs people of dignity. It makes them dependent on others. It deprives them of self-respect. So tzedaka is addressed not only to people's physical needs but also to their psychological ones. The rabbis based their approach on a finely nuanced understanding of the key verse, ["Be open-handed and freely lend him sufficient for his need in that which he lacks" \(Deut. 15:8\)](#)

Sufficient for his need: This means that you are commanded to maintain him, but you are not commanded to make him rich. The first provision ("sufficient for his need") refers to an absolute subsistence level. In Jewish law this was taken to include food, housing, basic furniture, and, if

necessary, funds to pay for a wedding. The second ("that which he lacks") means relative poverty – relative, however, not to others but to the individual's own previous standard of living.

Many of the world's religions have praised poverty, even embraced it as a virtue. They tell stories of saints who give away all they have and spend their lives with next to nothing. Judaism rejects this absolutely. Poverty is not, in Judaism, a blessed condition. It is, the rabbis said, "a kind of death" and "worse than fifty plagues". This psychological insight is eloquently expressed in the third paragraph of the Grace after Meals: "Please, O Lord our God, do not make us dependent on the gifts or loans of other people, but only on Your full, open, holy, and generous hand so that we may suffer neither shame nor humiliation for ever and all time."

Ideally the donor should not know to whom he or she is giving, nor the recipient know from whom he or she is receiving. If a poor person does not want to accept tzedaka, we should practice a form of benign deception and give it to him under the guise of a loan.

Giving someone a job or making him your partner would not normally be considered charity at all. It costs you nothing. But this further serves to show that tzedaka does not mean charity. It means giving people the means to live a dignified life, and any form of employment is more dignified, within the Jewish value system, than dependence.

Economics is not a religious discipline. Yet underlying the Jewish passion for economics is a religious imperative: "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed towards your brothers and towards the poor and needy in your land" (Deut. 15:11).

Joy

when Moses, in his final blessing, says, "Happy are you Israel" (Deut. 33:29). The Torah's key word for positive emotion is **not happiness, but simḥa, joy**. Simḥa is usually translated as joy, rejoicing, gladness, happiness, pleasure, or delight. In fact, simḥa has a nuance untranslatable into English. Joy, happiness, pleasure, and the like are all states of mind, emotions. They belong to the individual. We can feel them alone. Simḥa, by contrast, is not a private emotion. It means happiness shared. It is a social state, a predicate of "we," not "I." There is no such thing as feeling simḥa alone. Moses repeatedly labours the point. When you rejoice, he says time and again, it must be "you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites, the strangers, the fatherless, and the widows in your towns." **What Moses is articulating for the first time is the idea of simḥa as communal, social, and national rejoicing. The nation was to be brought together not just by crisis, catastrophe, or impending war, but by collective celebration in the presence of God.**

When that happens, societies start to disintegrate. At the height of their good fortune, the long slow process of decline begins. The only way to avoid it, said Moses, is to share your happiness

with others, and, in the midst of that collective, national celebration, serve God. **Blessings are not measured by how much we own or earn or spend or possess, but by how much we share. Simḥa is the mark of a sacred society. It is a place of collective joy.**

There are fundamental differences between happiness and joy. **Happiness is a calm feeling, joy an exuberant one.** One can feel happiness alone, but joy in the Torah is always something shared with others. **Happiness depends on things going well, but one can experience joy even in the midst of adversity.**

That is what makes simḥa the supreme religious emotion. You do not have to be religious to be happy. But there is something profoundly spiritual about our capacity to live in a state of total insecurity and yet feel the joy of simply being, under the shelter of the Divine Presence.

Life is full of problems and pains, but beyond them is the sense of wonder that we are alive in a universe filled with beauty, and so long as we have the Torah, we still have hope.