

(Mishpatim Dvar Torah: Emma)

“You shall not wrong nor oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt”. This is one of the many laws taught in this week’s parasha, Mishpatim. But, this law is a very, very important one, for three main reasons. Firstly, it is mentioned twice during this Parsha, which is a big deal! Secondly, the idea of not oppressing strangers is written thirty-six times in the Torah. And finally, we can see this law is very important because it is written both as *mitzvah aseh* (a positive rule) and *mitzvah lo taaseh* (a negative rule). From all of these reasons, the Torah is almost screaming that properly treating strangers is very important.

But why is it so important? Why do we need to be conscience about how we are treating strangers? It is for a few reasons, but I think there is one main meaningful idea. First of all, there really is no such thing as strangers. God made people, all of them *b’tzelem elohim* - in the image of God. It was the people who decided that some were different. The people chose to make each other feel like they don’t belong, feel like they are strangers. So if we think about it, strangers don’t actually exist, they are almost a human invention. If this is really is true, then it must be very important not to oppress strangers, because strangers are actually just people. Strangers are all the same people, they are all human beings and there isn’t any difference between one “stranger” and another.

We as Jews know a thing or two about strangers. A very very long time ago, we were slaves to the Egyptians. The Egyptians chose to make us, some strangers, their slaves. During Passover, we teach the story of our oppression in Egypt, in order to

remember that we were once strangers. It is a big reminder of our history, something we can never forget, in order to make sure that other strangers don't suffer through what we as Jews did.

Although we try very hard to make this happen, there are still many people who are automatically oppressed or shut out. People who look different from us, people who have disabilities, people who are homeless or people who are new or unfamiliar, these are just **some** examples of strangers. They are all people who can be, and have been, labelled as strangers. Just because someone is different or "unknown" to us, we as people choose to shut them out. In life we choose to take the easy way out and the way that makes us feel comfortable. For example standing somewhere else on public transit because you would prefer not to sit next to a person you don't know. Or looking down and walking faster when you pass a homeless person on the street. Even not offering to guide a new student around school because you feel more comfortable not helping them, rather watching them struggle from afar. These are all small things that I know most of you and myself, have done before. None of this may seem like a big deal, but really they are all examples of oppressing a stranger.

Even though we can come up with hundreds of examples of people oppressing strangers, there are also many people who show love for the stranger. For example, the Government of Canada is helping 25,000 Syrian refugees come to Canada. Even Temple Shalom is helping out the Syrian refugees, by raising \$80,000 to sponsor families. Or the Jewish organization called Ve'ahavta who make positive changes on people impacted by poverty, from all faiths. Or even how at my school, the grade seven

Chesed Club have organized many fundraisers for all sorts of causes, like donating needed items to homeless people, who are complete “strangers to us.

These examples bring up an interesting point. Maybe it isn't just about **not oppressing** the stranger, maybe it's about being compassionate to them too. We can't just sit on the couch, watch television and not doing anything useful with our lives. I mean, yes that would definitely count as not oppressing a stranger, but it isn't very helpful or interesting. If we are compassionate to strangers, it is taking that one step further. Being compassionate, loving, and helpful towards someone who you don't know, can really make a difference. No matter how big or small, we have to be helpful and kind towards those we don't know, because who knows when maybe one day we will need their help back.

I know about this because in my life, I have been a stranger before. My family and I moved from England to Vancouver, way back in 2007. I was a stranger to Vancouver, I didn't know anything about the city and I didn't have any friends or extended family. Once I had finally started to get settled, in Grade One I was plucked out of my school and became a stranger again. I started to attend Vancouver Talmud Torah, where again I didn't have any friends. And now, after seven years of getting comfortable with the school and my classmates, I will become a stranger again. My family and I will move back to England this summer, and I will become a stranger once more. After being a stranger myself twice already, and learning about how to treat strangers through the process of becoming a Bat Mitzvah, I think that I will be very

prepared moving back to England. I will not only be able to treat the strangers around me with kindness and respect, but I will be able to teach them how to do the same.

I wouldn't have been able to learn any of this without Cantor Taussig, Rabbi Brown and Rabbi Dan. Thank you all for helping me with the preparations for my Bat Mitzvah. I also want to give Kathe a huge thank you for teaching me my Torah portion, and my Haftarah, and for always having delicious snacks for Mikal and I to eat at our lessons each week! I am truly thankful to all of my friends who came to share this special day with me and my family.

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Last but not least, thank you, Mummy and Daddy. Mum, you did so much for today, making tons and tons of food, booking my nail appointment, and hair appointment, and taking me shopping, and buying balloons and on and on and on. Dad, well you mostly ate all of the food that Mummy made, but you also helped me come up with ideas for this speech and you did lots of driving to and from different stores and airports. Thank you for being the best Mum and Dad I could ask for. Thank you and Shabbat Shalom to everyone.