

D'var

Shabbat shalom everyone and thank you all for joining me and my family here today as we celebrate my bat mitzvah.

My parsha, the portion from the Torah that we just read, is Mishpatim, which translates to laws. This means that the entire parsha is filled with law after law after law. So there was a huge variety for me to choose to talk about.

There's one mitzvah or one commandment that stood out for me from the beginning. It is "And you shall not mistreat a Ger, nor shall you oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt". A Ger, in biblical times was a person who would attach themselves to the Jewish people who was not Jewish. Now a days it could be an immigrant, a new classmate, member at work, or really anyone who is a newbie.

So what is this pasuk, this verse, telling us? It is trying to remind us that we were suffering in Egypt as immigrants once too, and we seem to forget about it. So I have a question for you. Raise your hand if you live in a different city than the one you were born in.

——Answer——

So if you look around, you will see that quite a few people have their hands up. This means that all of those people have been a stranger or a 'ger' to their city. Do you remember what it felt like? Did you know people there? Did you feel accepted? How did people treat you? These questions can really go for anyone who has been a ger not just an immigrant. However this might not be the case of some people, when you move somewhere new, or do something new it can be hard. For example, if you go to a new school it can be hard to find friends, and can be scary at first, and the same thing with starting a new job. There are even more extreme examples of being a ger.

A few weeks ago, my family and I went to an organization called Kinbrace. It is an organization that provides housing and other types of support for refugees that find themselves in Vancouver. We joined them for their Tuesday night community dinner. There we spoke with people who

came from Nigeria, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Iraq and so many more places. One woman told us her story. She was in a violent situation in Nigeria. As a member of the Lion's Club, she came to a meeting in Toronto with her two year old son. When the conference was over she made the courageous decision to not get on her flight back to Nigeria where her two other teenage children still remain. She spoke about how hard it is to adjust to Canada. For example, people raise their children here differently, she had no friends or family aside from her son and it is a different culture over all. But when she found Kinbrace she said it felt like walking into heaven. It was meeting people that were warm and welcoming that made it so much easier. It was there that I got a deeper understanding of what this commandment is about.

Even 1,000 years ago Rashi, a commentator on the Bible, understood the problems of a ger. He understood the first part of the pasuk; 'And you shall not mistreat a ger' as you shall not taunt them with words. This can be name calling, or making one feel like an outsider more than they are. I recently heard a story of a high school kid from our community saying that all of the Chinese people should go back to where they came from. In his mind they didn't seem to fit in. But what he forgot was that a while ago, those things were said about Jews. This boy had forgotten about about what happened to us in Egypt.

Rashi explains the second half of the pasuk; 'Nor you shall oppress him' as by robbing him of his money. This can be stealing their money but it can also be not hiring someone because of their ethnicity, paying them less than you would pay others or limiting their access to education because of where they come from.

For an immigrant, the first thing that they would want to find once they have moved somewhere new is a home. By robbing their money, or not hiring them for a job you are making it impossible for them to get a home.

We still have an unanswered question. Why do we mistreat people when we have had the experience ourselves of being mistreated? I think that now that we are living in the safety in a country that we feel accepted in, we have forgotten our past hard experiences and in some obscure way, some people feel better about themselves when they bully or put down other people. Sometimes one would think that you get the feeling of having more power when they put others down. In reality, this doesn't really work.

Standing here today, I can tell you that I haven't really been much of a stranger in my life. While all of my family was born outside of Vancouver, I am the only one that has lived here my whole life. I have lived in the same house for most of my life, I have been part of the same community, and I have been going to the same synagogue. Even when I started out at Talmud Torah, (my school) I already had my sister who had been going there for three years. When I started gymnastics, I went with Rakeea, and the list goes on. In a certain way, I don't know what it feels like to be a stranger.

And for the first time, as I enter this stage of my life, I am going into a new world. And it seems like I will be a ger. As I become a Bat Mitzvah, I know have to fulfil the mitzvot - those rules listed here. I have to fast on Yom Kippur and choose how I'm going to be a Jew. I have never done this before. However there are things that could make it easier for me. Just like the woman at Kinbrace experienced, having a warm community that will help me along with my journey is important. A community that offers guidance and support with making decisions. And most of all, a community that will remind me to not forget about the time we were in Egypt and we were suffering, and remind me to think about those who are in need of homes, food and comfort.

Firstly, I would like to thank everyone who have come from places like
-New York
-Israel
-Montreal
-Victoria
-India
-Ontario
-Albany
and
-Philadelphia.

Unfortunately, my Saba and Savta could not make it today but I know that they are here in spirit.

Thank you so much to my teachers, Debby and Hillel for preparing me for today by teaching me my Torah reading and Tephilot. These are skills that I will use for the rest of my life.

Rakeea, thank you so so much. Not only for reading an Aliya, but for being the most caring and amazing sister I could ask for. You have always been there for me, and you are always willing to help me out in what ever way possible, even if it is mixing cookie dough by hand. Preparation for this day could not have happened without you by my side. I love you so much.

Ima, you have put up with my hours and hours of looking online for dresses, making sure that the table runners and flowers are just the way I want them to be and my insane obsession of making sure that there are macaroons at my Friday night dinner. Thank you for that. But also thank you for helping me write my D'var, and being the most incredible Ima in the world. I love you.

Aba, I could not thank you enough. You have helped me every step of the way. From helping me write my D'var Torah to helping me practice my Aliyot and Tephilot. And I just wanted say that when I told you that I was writing my 'thank you's', you said that I could just write: thanks Aba and then put a wink face. But I couldn't do that. You deserve so much more than a wink face. Not even 10, 000 wink faces can make up for all of the help that you have been. I love you so much.

And most of all, thank you to everyone who has joined us here today.

Shabbat Shalom.