D’var Torah B’shalach – Feb. 4, 2023

By Harvey Mamon

Shabbat shalom. My name is Harvey Mamon.

Bert and I joined the Newton Center Minyan over 30 years ago, and this is the first time I am giving a d’var torah on a shabbat morning. If nothing else, my standing here is a testament to Steve Brown’s perseverance.

HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, has established this shabbat as the 5th annual refugee shabbat, with the goal of drawing attention to refugees and asylum seekers. This year, the total number of displaced persons globally has exceeded 100 million for the first time.

On the occasion of this refugee shabbat, I will be discussing the familiar Biblical admonition not to oppress the stranger, because we were strangers in Egypt.

In the Talmud, Bava Metzia page 59b, Rabbi Eliezer asks: “For what reason did the Torah issue warnings in 36 places, with regard to causing distress to a stranger?”

Interestingly, none of those 36 references to remembering we were strangers occur in today’s parsha of b’shalach, which describes the moment b’nei yisrael became refugees, fleeing persecution in Egypt, the only country they had known, to spend a generation wandering in the desert. The parsha opens after the 10 plagues; finally, Pharaoh has let the people go. However, true to form, and clearly not having learned from the events of the previous two parashot, Pharaoh’s heart is hardened for an 11th time; he reconsiders his decision to allow the children of Israel to go, sending 600 of his most capable chariots to recapture them. The Children of Israel don’t react particularly well, crying out to Moses:

Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt?

As we know, however, they are forgiven for this lack of courage and the events don’t end well for the Egyptians, when God locks the wheels of their chariots in the mud of the divided red sea, and the waters then return, drowning them all. Not one remained.

לֹא־נִשְׁאַר בָּהֶם עַד־אֶחָד

These events are immediately followed by shirat hayam and the song of Miriam, giving this shabbat its name of shabbat shirah.

Given the centrality of leaving Egypt in today's parsha, why is there no mention of remembering we were strangers in Egypt? I would suggest it was just too soon. The recently freed slaves were not yet ready. Many midrashim have described the Exodus from Egypt, specifically the crossing of the Red Sea, as the birth of the Jewish people. We entered Egypt as a klan, but not a nation. We left Egypt with a legacy of centuries of slavery. But now, with yetziat mitzrayim, we are first becoming a nation. The metaphor extends to the imagery of the divided Red Sea as the birth canal. On arriving at the other side, B'nei Yisrael were not a mature nation, but a people in its infancy. Dr. Orit Avneri, a fellow at The Hartman Institute and a Bible scholar at Shalem College, describes the Children of Israel's developmental stage as follows:

"Like any newborn baby, the people will cry and scream for their most immediate needs – water, food. Moshe and God will provide for them because that's how you take care of an infant. You give water and food. You can't expect anything else."

In terms of Maslow's Hierarchy of needs, they are the lowest level of physiological needs and safety, and a long way from self-actualization or transcendence. They are not yet at the stage of development where they can be asked to consider the moral obligations that come with having escaped their experience in Egypt.

God doesn't wait very long, however, to start to ask more of this newly developing nation. In next week's parsha, Yitro, God introduces the concept of following the covenant to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,

מַמְלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ

and shortly afterward is the revelation at Sinai.

The following week, in Mishpatim, , is the first time the Tanach mentions the obligations that come from having escaped Egypt.

וְגֵר לֹא־תוֹנֶה וְלָא תִלְחָצֶנּוּ כִּי־גֵרִים הֱיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם׃

"And you shall not mistreat a stranger or oppress him, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

In the remaining portion of this d'var, I'd like to address two questions about these 36 occurrences of the command to remember we were strangers:

-What is the significance of remembering that we were strangers in Egypt?

-Why does the Torah mention this so many times, indeed, more than any other commandment?

Regarding the significance, there are at least two ways we could approach the memory of oppression.

As Rabbi Shai Held wrote, in an essay entitled "Turning Memory into Empathy":

“The Torah could have responded quite differently to the experience of oppression in Egypt. It could have said, since you were tyrannized and exploited and no one did anything to help you, you don’t owe anything to anyone; how dare anyone ask anything of you? But it chooses the opposite path: Since you were exploited and oppressed, you must never be among the exploiters and degraders. You must remember what it feels like to be a stranger. Empathy must animate and intensify your commitment to the dignity and wellbeing of the weak and vulnerable. And God holds you accountable to this obligation.”

This is not just a modern reading. Ramban’s commentary on this parsha also emphasizes the call for not just sympathy for the stranger but empathy:

for you know the soul of a stranger, seeing you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Rambam takes it a step further, positing that “God loves the stranger,” implying that we are obligated to emulate God in this way.

So the message is very clear. The response to having suffered is to have empathy for those experiencing a similar fate, not to oppress them as you were oppressed but, to the contrary, to treat strangers with love.

But why is it mentioned so many times?

It is self-evident that the frequency of this admonition indicates that compassion for strangers is a central principle of Biblical ethics. More than this, though, the need to repeat this warning so many times is an indication that it was a problem in society, that is in practice, our ancestors did not remember their experience in Egypt in a way that led to sympathy for strangers. In fact, the opposite was likely true. As with many other moral admonitions in the Bible, if the people were not oppressing the downtrodden, there would have been no need to issue so many warnings against this behavior.

This is Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’, z”l, view:

Dislike of the unlike is as old as mankind. This fact lies at the very heart of the Jewish experience.

Perhaps the message behind these 36 repetitions, then, is that it is human nature to fear and oppress the stranger, so particular vigilance against this tendency is necessary. It is not difficult to find modern examples.

Many of us may have seen the Ken Burns documentary last fall about the US during the holocaust. One of the many disturbing things he pointed out was that the anti-immigrant rhetoric that kept Jewish refugees out of the US in the 1940s was eerily similar, if not identical, to the anti-immigrant rhetoric so frequently heard during the last two presidential elections. Other examples can be found throughout history.

The events of today's parshsa are of course central to The Passover Haggadah, which is all about today's topic of remembering that we were strangers in Egypt. Yossi Klein Halevi pointed out, though, that a central teaching of the Haggadah is not to see ourselves as slaves, but as having escaped slavery.

בְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר חַיָּב אָדָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת עַצְמוֹ כְּאִלּוּ הוּא יָצָא מִמִּצְרָיִם

The difference is subtle, but important. In every generation we must see ourselves as if we had left Egypt. We need to maintain the sensitivity that comes with the memory of slavery, but we need to see ourselves as a free people with power, agency and therefore a responsibility to act.
On this refugee shabbat, it behooves us to remember that although we were strangers in Egypt, we are now in a much more advantaged situation, and need to use that advantage to help those in need.

I think it's fair to say that the Newton Center Minyan and its successors, Minyan Ma'or and the Walnut St. Minyan, along with Temple Emanuel, Temple Reyim and other synagogues in the area have taken on this challenge, working with NBARC – the Newton-Brookline Asylum Resettlement Coalition - to advocate for local families fleeing crises in Syria and Afghanistan. Members of our community have taken the lead in providing housing, food, clothing, English language instruction, employment assistance and general guidance to help with integration into society, directly fulfilling the Mitzvah as stated in Leviticus 19:34

כְּאֶזְרָח מִכֶּם יִהְיֶה לָכֶם הַגֵּר ׀ הַגָּר אִתְּכֶם וְאָהַבְתָּ לוֹ כָּמוֹךָ כִּי־גֵרִים הֱיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם׃

The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, *for you were strangers in the land of Egypt*: I the LORD am your God.

So what is the take-home message on this refugee shabbat?

I will give Rabbi Sachs the final word:

"Why should you not hate the stranger? – asks the Torah. Because you once stood where he stands now. You know the heart of the stranger because you were once a stranger in the land of Egypt. If you are human, so is he. If he is less than human, so are you. You must fight the hatred in your heart as I once fought the greatest ruler and the strongest empire in the ancient world on your behalf. I made you into the world's archetypal strangers so that you would fight for the rights of strangers … There is only one reply strong enough to answer the question: Why should I not hate the stranger? Because the stranger is me."