

Andy Russell's Dvar Torah

Abraham Heschel wrote that "To pray is to take notice of the wonder, to regain a sense of the mystery that animates all beings, the divine margin in all attainments."

My journey to this day started with prayer.

I was raised by Jewish parents who called themselves secular humanists. We observed shabbat and all the major holidays, but with our own secular blessings rather than traditional Jewish prayers. I went to Hebrew school and learned Jewish history, holidays, heritage, and language, but no prayers. I was encouraged to connect with my own spirituality through the lens of Judaism but was given no guidelines. After 5 years of Hebrew school, my brother and I had our *b'nei mitzvah* in Israel, on top of Masada. We each read a poem or passage in Hebrew and then our own translations into English. It was a beautiful and memorable ceremony but bore no resemblance to a traditional *bar* or *bat mitzvah*. There was no Torah; there were no traditional prayers.

For years I felt strangely out of place in synagogue – surrounded by Jews celebrating familiar holidays and events, but with prayers and rituals that I knew nothing about.

I realized that I grew up steeped in the spirit of *kavanah* - the more personal intentional dimension of prayer, but without *keva* – the fixed nature of prayer, to anchor me in tradition. The blessings I grew up speaking and hearing were beautiful, and full of personal meaning, but when I attended synagogue, which I did more and more frequently as I grew older, I realized I did not share a common language with other Jews. I wanted to learn the traditional prayers, as they are the prayers of my ancestors and my contemporaries, and they bind me to the past and future generations of my family, and also to the larger Jewish community.

This interplay – between *keva*, and *kavanah* – is something that Jews have been debating and writing about for centuries. Heschel wrote "prayer...is dominated by a polarity of regularity and spontaneity, of the stillness of a fixed text (*keva*) and of the motivity of inner devotion (*kavanah*), of empathy and self-expression. "

Through the adult bar/bat mitzvah class, I have learned traditional prayers, and with each one I feel my ancestors gather closer. Chanting the prayers, I feel a connection stretching back, not only to visiting with my grandfather in synagogue, or with my grandmother on *Yom Kippur*, but to all of my ancestors and all Jews who have recited these same words for thousands of years. I have come to realize that the *keva* of the liturgy is just as important as the *kavannah* of my own prayers.

Learning my Torah portion has also given me insight into the importance of literal readings of the text, as well as and historical and modern interpretations. What meaning can we get from chanting the portion "... The guilty one may be given up to forty lashes, but not more, lest being flogged further, to excess, your peer be

degraded before your eyes?" Is it rote and without feeling that we chant these lines? Or is the act of chanting itself imbued with meaning, connecting us to the annual reading of the Torah that has endured for millennia? Can we use these ancient words today, to begin to understand what it means for a punishment to be just, instead of overly harsh?

Part of what I have been learning over the past two years is that so much depends upon interpretation, and that people have been interpreting these words for thousands of years, trying to unlock their meaning. Today we look not just to classical commentators such as Maimonides, but also to modern day interpreters such as Marcia Falk or Alicia Ostriker. I did not delve into the deeper meaning of the words of my portion, but now I have new appreciation for what that process means. Learning the richness of Jewish tradition and the importance of balancing *keva* and *kavanah* helps ground me in my spiritual life and helps guide my family in our practice of Judaism.

Katie Harris's Dvar Torah

Our Torah portion, *Ki Tetzei*, directs us to treat others with kindness and respect. It is filled with *mitzvot*, or commandments, that lay out how to treat others, the stranger, the orphan, the widow. It says, for example, "You shall not subvert the rights of the stranger or the orphan; you shall not take a widow's garment in pawn. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and that your G-d the eternal redeemed you from there; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment." It also says we should be honest in all dealings, always using honest weights in our transactions. Jewish tradition emphasizes the pain of the outsider and seeks solutions to it. Commandments calling for sensitivity and justice for the stranger are found in 36 places within the Torah, more than any other mitzvah.

The Talmud, too, describes two important guiding values for how we treat others, *Kavod* and *Bushah*. *Kavod* dictates that we treat others with the utmost dignity. *Bushah*, shame or humiliation, tells us that we must always avoid causing humiliation to others.

All of these principles expressly tell us how we interact with others, strangers, non-Jews. As I read these verses from my portion, I couldn't help but wonder how Israel, a state that is supposed to operate under Jewish law, can treat others, Palestinians, in such appalling, humiliating ways?

Some of you may know that I recently spent five weeks in the West Bank. This was my eighth trip to Israel and Palestine. I've been going there since I was five years old.

Yet this trip was devastating. Why? Zero *kavod*, dignity was given to Palestinian people. Settlements snaked down adjacent mountains and met in the middle, splitting Palestinian villages in half. Palestinians who hadn't been home when their houses were raided by the army lost their residency permits. Then their houses were demolished.

At the same time, there was *bushah*, shaming and humiliation, everywhere. I witnessed the relentless humiliation of Palestinians by Jews, my people, in the name of all Jews, every day, in every way. Hebron was an open-air prison. Palestinians are subject to checkpoints to enter their own neighborhoods. Kids are tear-gassed on the way to school. Tanks spray neighborhoods with skunk scent. Settlers attack both Palestinians and visitors. The *haredi*, or ultra-orthodox Jews strut around, armed with rifles, like posse members. 550 Palestinian store fronts have been welded shut by the Israeli Defense Forces, supposedly to protect the settlers, who deliberately inserted themselves in Hebron's ancient Arab market.

Any way you slice it, bringing humiliation like this upon others is not who we are, as Jews. If Judaism is rooted in Torah, this behavioral is antithetical to who we are. If we, as Jews are vested in Israel's existence as a Jewish state, it is antithetical to our

survival; we only engender hatred and contempt for the Jewish people and the Jewish state by this treatment of others. If we, as Jews, are vested in our sense of peoplehood, we lose the essence of what makes us us.

As American Jews, we must tell the world, our government and the Israeli government: not in our name. We must embody *kavod*, dignity and respect in our interactions, and ensure that we do not cause *bushah*, shame and humiliation to anyone. We must demand *kavod* and oppose practices that cause *bushah* from Jewish organizations, which directly or indirectly, support Israel's existence as a Jewish state. And we must demand that the U.S. Government use its considerable leverage to pressure the Israeli Government to end its illegal, unethical occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Only in a framework of ensuring *kavod*, dignity and respect, and preventing *bushah*, shame and humiliation, will lasting peace be possible.

Through the process of becoming a *bat mitzvah*, I explored how fundamental values, guiding how we treat others, are plainly spelled out in the Torah. I am more committed than ever to reminding our people of these fundamental values, so that Israel can be a place that reflects not the worst, but, rather, the best of who we are.

Candace Rosovsky

D'var Torah, B'nai Mitzvah

September 17, 2016

14 Elul 5776

Kol HaNeshamah Synagogue, Seattle

I want to thank Rabbi Zari for allowing me the privilege of studying with her and my wonderful, insightful, brilliant classmates, all of whom have taught me to bend a little more, listen a little better. I am grateful to the Ensemble, who invited me in almost the first time I walked in the door, and each of you who loved on my Mother, including giving her, though neither of us were congregational members, the blessing of *Tahara* when she passed.

We are in this world together. We are community. And I am grateful to you all.

Ki Teitsei. Where Moses reminds us in a breath-taking marathon, that we can survive and thrive, only as we listen, remember, and act justly. In a chaotic whirlwind, he is guiding us toward “exquisite levels of empathy, gentleness and responsibility toward all creation.”¹

Lo Ta'ashok Sacheer: Rashi tells us that someone who is destitute “longs for everything because he has nothing...”² and he also tells us: “We cannot hide ourselves from doing good.”³

For the past two years, the letters of the Hebrew Aleph Bet refuse to be connected, as if Ben Shahn's illustrations were hitched to Chagall's floating women, hauntingly beautiful but chaotic, disconnected images on a page.

I like to think of Moses,
Standing on this last hillside
Gathering the children of Israel,
their children and grandchildren
Forty years of dust and mud
Manna and rotting quail
A desert filled with miracles,
A pendulum of people swinging between fear and freedom.
And betrayals.

These were the refugees of your soul.
The ones you convinced to be homeless
Who so often broke your heart.

I think of you.

I think of you, standing at Sinai
Barefoot, alone,

So bindingly close to the face of God
You saw Her light and power
In a burning bush that was not consumed.

What did it mean to listen to a voice no one else could hear?

Was it your *Ner Tamid*?
An inner, eternal, formidable light
That drove you to the brink
To question God and your own heart.

But always willing to listen. To hear. To speak.
To speak Truth to power and to the powerless.
To feel the presence of the *Shekinah*,
In the divine of your own reflected soul.

With sternness and rage,
empathy and love.

Remember, you said.
Even if I forget.
Remember.
Be generous. Help the stranger, the Jew, the widow.
Remember, even when you yourself have power
that you were once the slave,
And that everyone longs for love.

Listen.
Remember. "You cannot hide yourselves from doing good."

I think of those children
Frightened refugees, consumed with terror
At the abuses of power they had fled.
Trying, themselves, over and over again to get it right
And failing, falling,
Slipping back. Feet and heads and hands full of
Mud and dust.

Well, we know the story:
How you, too, failed yourself and them.

In that moment everything broke:
Their Golden Calf. God's Tablets. Your heart.
Your thin thread with God.

And the innocence of the law.

All those broken letters flying
into the sky to make new constellations
guiding the slow and weary path of these migrants,
trying out new laws to make you safe enough
in that embroiled tent city.

And you started to repair and turn again.

Now, on this last hillside
Looking out at a land you will never inherit,
You do what you have always done best:

You listen and you speak.

Only this time, it is an old man's memory
And like the Hebrew letters on every Torah scroll,
The sacred words remind us that
“One must still have chaos in oneself
To be able to give birth to a dancing star.”⁴
As each of the children, each of us,
a small ray of light in the dark sky
begins the dance to light.

“Though mountains may depart from you
and hills be far removed,
My love shall never depart from you
And My covenant of peace
Shall not be removed.”⁵

Shabbat Shalom

¹Kukla, Eliott and Reuben Zallman. “To Wear is Human, to Live – Divine: *Parashat Ki Tetse* (Deuteronomy 21:10 – 25:19).” *Torah Queeries*, edited by Gregg Drinkwater, J. Lesser, & D. Shneer, NYU Press, 2009, p. 257.

² Rashi (n.d.) Commentary on Ki Teitzei (Deut. 24:14). Retrieved from <http://www.chabad.org/parshah/torahreading.asp?aid=2495812&jewish=Ki-Teitzei-Torah-Reading.htm&p=7#showrashi=true>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Nietzsche, Frederick. “Thus Spake Zarathustra.” *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited by Walter Kaufman, Viking Penguin, Inc., 1982, p. 5.

⁵ Isaiah 54:10 (from the Haftarah for this parashat).

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Sue Peiser's Dvar Torah

As Rabbi David Vaisberg wrote: "Torah is our lifeblood and our sweetness. Though we have both our favorite parts and those sections we would rather skip, Torah was given to us as one sacred text. Its beautiful parts and its flawed parts all are sacred to our people"

Ki Teitzei, from the Book of Deuteronomy, lays out laws to regulate domestic and civil life, including the exemption Moses would give a man who was a newlywed-- that he wouldn't have to serve in the army for a year so that he could give "happiness" to his wife. If a married man died without a son, the man's brother was mandated to marry the wife of the deceased or they were both shunned. If a man accused his wife of not being a virgin when he married her, the woman's parents had to show the proof of virginity to the town elders. If the accusation was false, part of the consequence for the husband was that he would never have the right to end the marriage. This makes me shudder. This is more of a punishment to the woman, who would be forced to stay married to a man who was judgmental and harsh toward her.

I like to think that I would not have adhered to these kinds of archaic laws, but I also have the privilege of viewing them as archaic because we are continually offered the challenge to wrestle with the Torah and to interpret it in light of our times. The meaning of the word Israel is: "one who wrestles with God." This wrestling is an honor, and it can also be an exhausting burden. If a code of behavior made sense to *all* of us, we would be able to follow it without distress, but we would lose out on the sacred process of engaging deeply with the Torah and weighing its commandments against our own values to arrive at a path that is true to ourselves.

Jewish values are key to my perspective on the world. Tikkun Olam--I strive to make the world a better place than I found it. Kindness, community, respect toward elders, visiting the sick, studying Torah. All of these core values are woven into my world. Then there is family, which may or may not include spouses or children. I am lucky to have both: my son Joshua, and my wife Mary, who I married two months ago, right before turning 50.

This Parshah clearly would not have held up lesbian, interfaith marriages such as mine as an example of creating a rich, vibrant, Jewish community, but I believe that our marriage does precisely that. Both Mary and I are committed to our continued spiritual growth and opportunities to learn and evolve at Kol HaNeshamah and at Amazing Grace Spiritual Center, which Mary introduced me to and which has become an integral part of my spiritual path. We were honored to have both a Reverend and a Rabbi co-officiate our wedding. It was not easy to find a Rabbi who felt at ease with questioning the part of Jewish tradition that honors the integrity of a Jewish wedding by discouraging co-officiation with other clergy. It's my moral imperative to question Jewish Law so that the walls of the synagogue are not so rigid that people feel that they don't belong.

Married couples who truly embrace their own faith communities, as well as those of their beloved, have the opportunity to enrich and strengthen their beliefs by being open to All Paths leading to God and to Good. To me the commitment to learn as much as I can about Faith reinforces my belief in a Kind and Loving Universe, and it is like my wedding vow to Mary. It is the vow to carry on the tradition of my ancestors, including my maternal grandparents, who were Orthodox Jews and who would be so proud that I am having my Bat Mitzvah. Better late than never.

Sue Peiser 9/17/2016

Richard's Dvar Torah

Being a scholar of religion by training, I could not resist developing some ideas I have been pondering for a while. My *dvar* is therefore too long. You can find the whole text online, see your booklets, or there are a few copies in the foyer. I can say this:

The *dvar* moves in three acts. In the first part I attempt to show that there is value to reminding people of their obligations (and this is why Torah phrases things in imperatives and repeats ideas). Second, I want to show that what Torah is teaching is an evolving idea that both inspires and is moved by the social norms of the age (commentary is both how we progress and show that progress). And then lastly I develop the notion that Torah, perhaps Deuteronomy in particular, has presumed a sense of spirituality in which our native pro-social reward circuits are the very real rewards being promised (drawn from a spiritual or mystical reading of the text).

Reflections on *Ki Teitzei*

Yehuda ben Gershom v' Yehudit

(Richard Curtis, PhD)

13 Elul 5776

(September 17, 2016)

*"You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and, Ha Shem, your God, redeemed you from there. On account of this I command you to do this thing."
(Deuteronomy 24:18)*

The commentary I offer below moves in three acts. In the first part I attempt to show that there is value to reminding people of their obligations (and this is why Torah phrases things in imperatives and repeats ideas). Second, I want to show that what Torah is teaching is an evolving idea that both inspires and is moved by the social norms of the age (commentary is both how we progress and show that progress). And then lastly I develop the notion that Torah, perhaps Deuteronomy in particular, has presumed a sense of spirituality in which our own pro-social reward circuits are the very real rewards being promised (drawn from a spiritual or mystical reading of the text).

We begin with, "**you** were a slave in Egypt," not "your ancestors were." It would have been sufficient to say ancestors, but the text makes the much stronger and demanding statement that you, the individual reading/hearing was a slave, and you have been redeemed from that slavery. Why is the narrative so intentionally personal, phrased in second person?

I should note that this verse does not get much formal attention. I can find no reference to this verse in the whole of the Talmud. OK, maybe we can't expect Talmud to reference every single verse. Verses repeat themes. The core idea I am focusing on, **you remember**, is also mentioned in Exodus 13:3, Deuteronomy 5:15, 15:15 and 16:12. From Talmud, *Pesachim* 96b.3 does comment on Exodus 13:3, but the focus is unleavened bread. *Chullin* 142a.9 comments on Deuteronomy 5:15 but the focus is remembering the Sabbath. Neither Deuteronomy 15:5 nor 16:12 is referenced in Talmud either. The themes in Torah for those verses are sacrifices and law respectively.

Some of the great rabbis of the past did offer commentary. What I want you to notice is the evolution of ideas that are drawn from the same text over time.

Rabbi Eliezer the Great (1st Century CE) taught that Torah warns against wronging the stranger in 36 different verses, including this one. And Rabbi Nathan the Babylonian (2nd Century) commenting on one of the related *parashot* said that: "You shall neither wrong a stranger, nor oppress him; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt, means that one must not taunt one's neighbor about a flaw that one has oneself."

Rashi (11th Century) said: "(God says) On that condition I redeemed you, (namely, on the condition) that you observe My statutes, even if you incur monetary loss in the matter." That seems standard fare, but why remember, not just obey because ancestors were liberated? Rashi tells us observance is the price we pay for that redemption, but does not address the second person wording, you were a slave.

Saforno (16th Century) said: "He took note of your desperate situation and dealt with you over and beyond the requirements of justice in order to be able to redeem you." Again we find the idea of reciprocity. Because God did such and such you must do such and such. Still no mention of why the remembering is me personally. As an aside, it seems to me very much like the redemption from slavery was a requirement of justice, not superogatory (good beyond required) as Saforno thought (that reading would be how John Calvin interpreted the passage too, and they did live around the same time).

As we get closer to our time we find another take on it. Reb Hirsch Leib Berlin (19th Century) said the deeper meaning has to do with learning compassion and sympathy. Here things get interesting. Was that idea about compassion absent in previous generations or just unstated? I don't really know, but it seems a good illustration of how the evolution of ideas in religion works and how commentary serves contemporary issues.

Around the same time, the great Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler (President of Hebrew Union College from 1903 to 1921) wrote: "Judaism has evolved the idea of the unity of [humanity] as a corollary of its ethical monotheism." And, "...Judaism has offered

in its prophetic hope for a Messianic future the guiding idea for the progress of [humanity] in history.”

Steven Pinker makes clear in his new book, *The Better Angels of our Nature*, that historically *shalom* – peace and harmony – was elusive. We are historically a violent species and becoming civilized has been a long bloody road. Judaism played an important role helping humanity make progress. Judaism happened to be the religion that articulated moral order as a goal at the time when societies were becoming sophisticated enough to value such a goal. This was a revolutionary idea then because it challenged violence as the foundation of social order. The call to justice remains revolutionary because in its fullest expression Judaism calls for universal solidarity and equality.

Why the emphasis on remembering (not obeying) though? Torah takes pains to remind us that we must value and pursue an ethical social life. We all must remember that we were slaves because the measure of our success as human beings is the degree to which humanity makes progress, moral progress in history. And, importantly, we do make progress. Our day is not the end. We must continue to fight for moral progress until there are no more people left behind.

Gay marriage is legal in the United States, slavery is universally outlawed, and most societies on Earth recognize a fundamental equality between the genders, and thus all humanity. True, these examples are mostly to do with words and the world is filled with ugly deeds. Yet, the Black Lives Matter movement can complain about police violence without the threat of actual lynching. Jews no longer face pogroms. The US Presidency broke the race barrier and is poised to break the glass ceiling. There has been progress.

We must remember because the progress of the past is not sufficient to answer the demands of today. For example, getting the right to vote in America was not the end of the Women’s Movement – it was the beginning. We must remember the struggles of the past so that we do not have to repeat them; just as we remember the suffering of the past so that we do not repeat it. Obeying does not produce progress. Remembering allows for an ongoing comparison to illuminate injustices yet unanswered.

Torah, as collective memory, repeats so that we remember. The story we are considering here tells us since we are now free we are obliged. Or put in a more modern idiom: because we have the abilities we owe it to those with the needs; and because we have needs those with abilities owe it to us to help. We sometimes forget that this formula comes with that demand form. The poor can, nay should demand what is necessary, according to Torah. In another voice: “From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs” (Marx got that formulae from somewhere after all).

Here we find the full answer. You are told that you were a slave in Egypt and were redeemed because you have social obligations. The story is set in a context in which the obligation becomes sacred. But what is really being protected by this idea? Some might offer, reverence for *Ha Shem*. There is something more basic to consider. The obligation you have today is current, it affects the society in which you live. The obligation is to be socially useful. Help your society be better. Why? Because *Ha Shem* rescued you and you are paying it forward? OK. Many of us don't believe the stories can, let alone should be read literally. So why remember? Because we need society and society works better when we all contribute. That really is a sacred obligation. Not because of its source but because of its real world importance.

Society is measured by fairness. It is not enough that some people's rights are better secured than others; what ethical life demands is that all rights are respected everywhere. Some might object that this sounds utopian. Yes, it is. Ethics is supposed to be utopian in its goals. "Love thee the stranger," Deuteronomy (10:19) says in some translations. Why? Because that is what decency demands, Torah is teaching. In a modern idiom we think of: "An injury to one is an injury to all!" David Coates, a socialist politician from a hundred years ago (and the 11th Lt. Governor of Colorado) said that. He wasn't Jewish but his ethics were. I remember that I was a slave in Egypt and though I am free I must empathize and act in solidarity with those who are still enslaved. "No one is free as long as others are oppressed." That line was made famous by Martin Luther King, Jr., but the source is much older and unknown, and sounds Jewish.

"The summons to remember that one was an *eved* [slave] in Egypt as a motivation for compassion with the disadvantaged occurs only in Deuteronomy...." Shalom Carmy wrote in 2009, (*Hebraic Political Studies*, vol. 4, #4). His point was that Deuteronomy is especially valuable as a moral text; where my point is that as a modern interpreter it occurs to him to read the text that way (and this is how human moral progress happens). He goes on to reference verse 5:15, which I pointed out above is one of the corollaries to the verse I am considering. He mentions that Nahmanides' commentary (13th Century) presumes empathy in a discussion of slavery in his society. Seeing those slaves rest on the Sabbath reminds people of their own past, is the idea. But in the 1200's! The Dark Ages! That was remarkably advanced moral thinking for its time, and something Judaism should be proud of inspiring.

What I wanted you to notice is that we see moral progress in the development of the commentary itself which reflects evolving moral standards. We see this movement from Talmud talking about ritual obligation, to Nahmanides presuming the text is teaching empathy, to Kohler arguing it is foundational.

That was acts one and two. From here I would like to delve deeper, into a more speculative conclusion. The ancient rabbis developed an interpretative formula they called *PaRDeS*: *Peshat*, *Derash*, *Remez*, and *Sod*. There is the *Peshat* surface

level, straight-forward meaning of the text; then the *Derash* hints to something else; the *Remez* is the deep interpretative level; and finally the hidden or mystical *Sod* meaning. The *Peshat* meaning of this verse is what Rashi gives us. Reb Berlin and Shalom Carmy offered the *Derash* of what it points to.

What really matters for a meaningful life is the *Remez level*, the interpreted meaning or explanation (be social, it is good for you) and the deeper *Sod* spirituality of it all.

The *Remez* level is what the first two parts were about. The deepest meaning of the Torah portion is the duty of the ethical life; a spirituality of the ethical life. Torah calls us to a deeply ethical form of life, in which consequences of our actions are always considered and are deeply important. From what we eat to how we dress, our choices in the world matter. We must attend to that, as social beings, equals amongst ourselves. This is the vital gift to humanity that Judaism offers.

There is more though, on the deepest level, which here I will call spirituality. I submit that at the *Sod* level of interpretation, the ethical life is understood as its own form of spirituality. I have written elsewhere that spirituality is akin to love, but in a context or situation that cannot be properly, which is to say literally, reciprocal. We cannot really love nature, for example, but we can feel an attachment that is called spirituality, a oneness of being that connects me to nature.

Specifically: *Spirituality is the practice of or the experience of reconnecting with something outside of and larger than the self; something that is social, natural and/ or supernatural.*

Deuteronomy goes on (24:19): The forgotten sheaf not retrieved, "it shall be the alien's and the orphan's and the widow's, so that Ha Shem, your God, will bless you in all your hands' work."

The Torah has a way of being very specific and today we understand the point to be more allegorical. I do not have a sheaf of anything anywhere to forget or retrieve; yet we do not think that this means the verse does not apply to me. We are being told to share what we can with those in need. We are part of a society and as such we have obligations. And just where is spirituality in all that? In the blessing!

When the Torah says "bless you in all your hands' work" what does that mean to us today? My claim is that this is the spirituality of ethical religion. I can and ought to feel that my giving of myself to help those in need is included in my spirituality. I feel my connection to the universe as mediated through society and history, being a social creature. When I make special contributions to that society – when it is most needed – I feel deeply connected. Ethics is the Torah's spirituality! I am one with the world when I am one with my social world and to maintain that world I must have empathy with those who suffer.

The blessing of my hands' work is the spirituality of ethical life. The feeling of reward that comes from the contribution is that blessing. When I give what is needed I feel powerfully connected to reality, especially social reality. When I receive what is needed I feel connected to reality, especially social reality. Our brains evolved complex reward circuits that respond to these situations so as to encourage pro-social behavior. Torah does not create the reward; it merely points it out to us. The rewards are built into our mammalian nature.

Torah does not tell me to do these things because I would not have that reward if not told, but rather because social existence is precarious. I may not need to be told that I was a slave, but in some sense we all need to be told together. Being part of society can also seem to provide excuses. Someone else will do it; someone else will solve the problem. That just does not work. So Judaism teaches: "It is not your duty to complete the task, but nor are you free to desist" (Pirke Avot 2:21). The collective, we, needs to be told so that the individual, I, does not feel exempted prematurely. So Judaism teaches: "If not now, when?" (Hillel).

In fact, many people think this was a core idea of Fyodor Dostoyevsky. His idea was that recognizing and following our conscience is the experiential core of all religion (what today we call spirituality). I am not sure if I agree that it is the experiential core of all religion, but to the degree all religions emphasize right and wrong he has a point. That he recognized that living the ethical life could be experientially important in and of itself is my point. I am not the first to suggest that living an ethically good life is its own form of spirituality. What I want you to notice is that it is there in Torah.

I remember that I was a slave because that tells me I have to seek justice for those who do not yet have it. I must do what I can to help those in need. But the deeper point is that in the work of caring for needs is the blessing, the reward, the feeling of rewards. I do the work and feel the rewards. They do not come undeservedly, Torah reminds us over and over. People think of that as being a grand statement about free will or God's justice, but really the observation is more basic – we cannot feel the goods, the blessings of being part of society without being an active participant, to the degree we are able.

Religion, like life, is a commitment one makes and from that commitment come rewards, good feelings, blessings (in the traditional idiom); but only because one lives the commitment, does the work, honors the *mitzvot* (in the traditional idiom).

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