

B'nai Mitzvah, August 25, 2007
Drash by Ceclila
Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles

Ki Tetze Deut 24:20-22

Thanks to my teachers Lisa, Fran, Daniel, for their wisdom, patience and guidance. Thanks to my fellow students and travelers on this journey, Linda, Gavi, and my wife, who always inspires me, usually accompanies me on my journeys and this time remained awake during our studies.

This Torah portion is laden with mitzvot involving war, female captives, polygamy, inheritance, defiant sons, disposal of a executed man, lost and fallen animals, cross dressing, egg collecting, home remodeling, farming, ritual garments and many more uncomfortable and infuriating passages referring to the treatment of women. Sounds sort of like a new Showtime series.

My particular verses provide the instruction, "When you beat your olive tree, do not remove the splendor behind you; it shall be for the proselyte (the stranger), the orphan and the widow. When you harvest your vineyard, you shall not glean behind you, it shall be for the proselyte (the stranger), the orphan and the widow. You shall Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, therefore I command you to do this thing.

So here we are instructed to consciously leave behind a portion of the fruits of our labor for those perceived as less fortunate than us-with G-d reminding us that we were once the less fortunate. Interestingly, we are NOT instructed to harvest it for them. It is expected that they will make their own efforts to gather it.

Throughout the Torah is the instruction to Remember- remember what Adonai did for you, remember what Adonai did to them, remember.

Ellie Weisel wrote: I marvel at the resilience of the Jewish people. Their best characteristic is their desire to remember. No other people has such an obsession with memory.

Suppose that our memories continue to define who we are today. Our remembrances, perceptions (correct or incorrect) guide our interactions in the world. We make certain choices based our memories. Many of our memories though not conscious or in the forefront hold power.

You hear a certain melody or song and it reminds you of a specific time, maybe a particular place or event. A distinctive smell evokes a memory-maybe mom or grandma's kitchen or the smell of your first born. Many of us who grew up in the 60's remember what that time smelled like.

The LA Times has been running a series of stories about memory, looking at brain chemistry and mapping memory. Scientists can see how memory begins, how it travels and where it lives in the brain (of rats-for now).

I believe that we are shaped by our collective memory as human beings. That poses the question, are the Jewish people hard wired to pursue justice and compassion because of our earliest struggles? What about Jews by choice? What about our youngest generation who may not have a memory reference to oppression-in Egypt, Nazi Germany, Alabama or even Stonewall? Is reading books or hearing the stories we tell enough to tap into that collective memory?

The individuals who actively participate in tikun olam are not all Jews and not all Jews perform tzedakah. But I trust that those who pursue justice, strive to repair the world and perform acts of loving kindness whether it is conscious or unconscious have something in common-that collective memory that we are on this journey together.

And what of our fellow human beings who do not share these pursuits. Hint: Here's where I begin to weave in my Torah verses. This is one of those times to remember G-d's words to us. As we consciously perform acts of tikun olam and tzedakah, they become the fruits of our labor that we leave for those less fortunate than us-those who have yet to access their collective memory of us as all G-d's creations.

I'll close with a quote from Ellie Weisel-"Mankind must remember that peace is not God's gift to his creatures; peace is our gift to each other."

Shabbat Shalom