

B'nai Mitzvah  
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Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles

My torah portion begins with the commandment: "Be compassionate and fair to the stranger, the orphan and the widow." It is followed by: "Remember you were slaves in Egypt Therefore I command you to do this thing. Leave behind some of the harvest for the stranger, the orphan and the widow."

I feel onnected to this portion. Being compassionate, fair and charitable is a huge focus in my life, both in my career as juvenile court judge working with youthful offenders and as a member of our BCC community.

But I felt a bit offput by the reminder that precedes the commandment to leave food for those in need. That familiar line: "V'zacharta ki eved hayito bmitzryaim," which usually puts me in awe of the vast history of our people, is here used as a reason to be charitable. "Remember you were slaves in Egypt, Therefore I command you to do this thing." Why is this troubling for me? Do Jews need to be reminded or guilted into performing acts of tzedakah? I acknowledge our history, but don't feel guided by the pain of our ancestors.

Here's one commentary: "Passion for social justice, empathy for the downtrodden is indelibly written within the collective Jewish psyche, the very core of Jewish character was birthed in the experience of slavery." Rabbi Amy Eilberg, first woman ordained as a conservative rabbif

And here's the most interesting commentary from a website which was entitled, "Torah of Dixie", interestingly entitled "The Benefits of Slavery: "Slavery was not a punishment, it was actually a blessing. Hashem has done a kindness to us by teaching our nation sensitivity, thereby making it easier to fulfill these types of mitzvoth." Only the south would claim that slavery was a blessing!

Well if this is an inbred trait, where does it leave Jews by choice? What about our future generations? How will they carry on a tradition of tzedakah and social action when the past to them becomes even more remote?

My passion for social justice cannot be explained by what happened centuries ago. My commitment feels intensely strong, and of the present. I am just not moved to action because of the oppression of past generations.

Searching for a different explanation, I came across a commentary from 19th century rabbi [Rabbi Finkel]. He insists that the act of tzedakah originates in the commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself." [Leviticus 19:18.] "No relationship of one person to another is complete without our feeling that we and the other are one, with no difference between us."

From Rabbi Bradley Artson, [Dean of Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the University of Judaism]: "A passion for justice is at the very core of what it means to be a Jew. As the torah commands, Justice, justice shall you pursue. One cannot love God without being passionate about justice."

Or consider the words of Stanley Kunitz Pulitzer Prize Winning Poet "The gift you have made to the world is an acknowledgment of the gift you have been given, the gift of life."

I was born a Jew, but only choose to practice my faith because of Judaism's focus on justice. I live a life full of compassion for others because of my love for Hashem, and my gratitude for Hashem's blessing of life. It is not the tit for tat, a payback for my ancestors' freedom, or a means to make it through the closing gates on Yom Kippur. I perform acts of social consciousness because my entire being radiates from the joy I feel in helping someone.

Hashem you created me as one who honors the blessing of life, and for that reason alone and without any other motivation, I freely embrace your commandments to pursue justice and to be compassionate to those in need. Thank you for the gift of compassion, the love of tzedakah, and the honor of being a Jew.

Shabbat shalom.