

Where are we in our scroll? We have just received the Ten “Sayings” at Sinai, we have just seen smoke and heard the cry of the shofar. God responds to Moses in, quite literally, thunderous tones. Awe and reverence is in this text, and compassion, too, for God reminds the people: “I will lift you up, on loving Eagle Wings – I have brought you back to me.”

Then, *Mishpatim*, “rules.” Ugh. Who likes to hear a bunch of rules? This is the reason we avoid Leviticus, after all. This is the boring stuff.

And, sometimes, the ugly stuff. One verse allows a slave owner to go unpunished after striking his slave as long as the slave survives the beating “a day or two.” *Mishpatim* defines a woman’s value by the existence of one small piece of tissue in her body. The rules we read are often challenging, difficult, awkward.

There is a lot of “oy” in Torah. Rabbis sometimes avoid the really difficult pieces in order to emphasize the beautiful ones. Maybe you think that this is exactly what I did tonight. After all, what did we chant?

The joy, obviously: You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to Me, and My anger shall blaze forth and I will put you to the sword, and your own wives shall become widows and your children orphans. If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, do not act toward them as a creditor; exact no interest from them. If you take your neighbor's garment in pledge, you must return it to him before the sun sets; it is his only clothing, the sole covering for his skin. In what else shall he sleep? Therefore, if he cries out to Me, I will pay heed, for I am compassionate.

These verses are the nice kind, right? We can congratulate ourselves for having scriptural texts that remind us no less than thirty-six times about how we ought to behave towards the widow and the orphan. God calls the poor “my people” in this passage. God pleads for our compassion, our godly compassion.

A nice bit of Torah, truly.

And yet, in today’s *Charlotte Observer*, the Reverend Tiffany Thomas wrote about the death of a homeless man who belonged to her community. The man died on a bench in Charlotte last Wednesday night. When she asked the police officer why the death didn’t make the news, he answered, “Deaths of this sort rarely make the news.”

No one will be punished for this man’s death. No righteous divine anger will exact restitution for society’s neglect of the poor. The corpse was removed in the night and Charlotte went about its business the next day.

It is very cold outside. How many of us heard these verses of Torah and worried, in those very moments, about those who will die in this cold tonight?

For we do know this: God does not fix the injustice of the world. God does not provide manna to feed the homeless. God does not cloth the poor.

We also know this. Humans fix injustice. Human beings feed those who are hungry. Human beings cloth the poor.

These verses are not the nice ones, the easy ones. We cannot read these verses, congratulate ourselves on the gracious humanity of our Torah, and go home satisfied.

We must not allow ourselves that luxury.

Last November, *The Charlotte Observer* ran a story about the effects of a cold snap on homeless women and their families. The story described one woman who chained herself to the pipes in the bathroom because she was afraid of what would happen to her children if they had no place to go. The article pointed out that “homelessness among families in Mecklenburg County has jumped between 21 percent and 36 percent each year since 2009.”

We don't have a building to offer the homeless, I know. We don't have our own kitchen. We don't have. We don't have.

What do we have? An intentional, sacred community. Last week, when I needed members of our congregation to be present at a funeral of a man none of us knew about one third of our members wrote to say they could make time to be there.

How are we to read the rules of Torah? Halakha demands that we are obligated to interpret the law in order to assure the best and most humane possible outcome. Some rules can trump others. There is no city so idolatrous that it must be destroyed the rabbis say – despite Deuteronomy – because there are always those sanctifying the Holy One in all places of the world. If a life is endangered and it happens to be Shabbat, you are required to do any kind of labor needed to save that life. The rules about ceasing work are trumped by the mandate of *pikuah hanefesh*. Literally, *pikuach* means to remove debris. *Pikuach hanefesh* means to remove a person from under debris, as in *pikuach hanefesh bashabbat*: you must remove debris to save a life on Shabbat.

If we decide that lives are in danger, we must act. We must remove the debris left by our own cares, our busy lives, our – let's say it – forgetfulness or apathy. We must save lives.

It is cold out there. We must act. I want to ask you to act in the way that we can – quickly, to get money to organizations feeding the hungry and housing the homeless. Join with me, please, in sending help.

Feed the hungry. Take care of the needy. Act, for joy.

Dear Barbara,

We are all set for Sunday March 9th. Thanks so much for your willingness to talk with us. There will be about 30 men attending, mostly my age or older. It starts at 8:30 AM for breakfast. You can speak for 15 to 20 minutes with 5 to 10 minutes questions & answers. I will leave the topic up to you. We need to know more about the Jewish religion, customs, etc. Whatever you decide will be wonderful and most enlightening. We generally finish by 9:30 AM since Sunday school starts at 10:00 AM. If Rolf would like to attend we would be pleased to have him join us.

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