*D’var Torah* for *Shabbat Shof’tim*, August 21, 2020

“Just Policing”

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I love the daring approach of the early Chassidic masters to the words of Torah. They were able to take Biblical language and concepts so old as to be beyond incomprehensible, and turn them into teachings that touch the individual soul. Suddenly, irrelevant passages of Torah began to speak directly to the pain, suffering, loneliness, doubt, anxiety, and confusion of the average Jew.

Those masters were influenced by a great central European scholar of the 16th century, Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz. His major work, the “two tablets of the covenant,” *Shney Luchot Hab’rit,* abbreviated as “Shlah,” set the tone for the Chassidic revolution that was to follow.

With respect to the first verse of this week’s portion, *Shof’tim*, the Sh’lah totally reinterprets the terms “magistrates and officers” to mean something other than what their original context intends. The verse says, “Magistrates and officers shall you place at your gates, *Shoftim v’shotrim titen l’cha b’chol sh’arecha,* and you shall administer your laws justly,” *v’shaf’tu et ha’am mishpat tzedek.*

Obviously, the Torah is speaking to ancient Israelites as they establish towns and cities in Israel and Judea. Real towns and cities, with real gates, and with real magistrates and police officers. And real laws about criminal and civil behavior, as laid out in the Torah itself.

But medieval Jews lived under the thumb of their host rulers. Other than administering Jewish laws pertaining to marriage and divorce, and possible intra-Jewish business disputes, those Jews had no use for magistrates or police. Especially police. Nothing made them more fearful than Russian or Polish or Ukrainian or Prussian police. Nothing.

So the Sh’lah reimagines “city gates” to be the apertures of the human face: the eyes, ears, nostrils, and mouth. All of them, says the Sh’lah, require “policing,” lest we let our guard down and allow “in” or “out” foul language or ideas, or unhealthful or un-kosher foods. Lest we look furtively at people, or listen to *lashon hara*, or stuff ourselves to the point that we endanger our lives.

In one fell swoop of midrashic bravado, the Sh’lah brings the ancient language to life. Suddenly, the average Jew comes to realize that the Torah cares about his or her well-being, his or her struggle to lead a holy life amid unspeakable challenges. Suddenly he or she sees that while we cannot stop the Cossacks from beating us, we can work to perfect our inner souls and our outer behaviors. We can have control over our lives, at least in a way that aligns us with the demands of God, Torah, and Jewish tradition.

But now my complaint. My complaint is that in our own time, we Jews are mightily privileged. For the most part, we don’t live in fear of the police or of vigilantes, except when anti-Semitic hordes rise up as they have in recent years. Therefore, we have the luxury of reading our Torah and our other sacred texts in this personalized, interior way, without having to think about the concrete challenges that the actual Torah was addressing for actual self-governing Jews.

That luxury allows us to turn Judaism into one great exercise in self-help and self-improvement. Not that it isn’t that, but that it is so much more than that, and primarily *not* that. Primarily it is a call from the One at the Center of Being to demand our ethical, covenantal behavior. It is a demand that we work toward that ethical norm in whatever world we occupy, whatever context we find ourselves in.

How fitting, then, that the Torah shouts out to us to try to square the laws on our books with the *enforcement* of those laws. To see to it that “liberty and justice for all,” and “all humans are created equal,” and “equal justice under law,” and other such concepts actually govern the attitudes and actions of those who enforce those sacred maxims.

If we are always ready to invoke “you were strangers in Egypt” to call for empathy toward the stranger and poor, then we need to be quick to identify with those among us who fear the police as we once did in the Pale of Settlement two and three centuries ago.

Yes, we should feel free to read “Magistrates and officers shall you place at your gates” to refer to our own inner spiritual and ethical work. But we really should then turn around and apply that inner work to the matters that our Torah originally called on us to address, as the Torah’s follow-up verse adjures, *tzedek tzedek tir’dof,* “Justice, justice shall you pursue.” Not simply admire or revere, but *pursue.* Not just “in here,” but out there where justice and enforcement have yet to walk hand in hand.