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## **Parshat Ki Tetze: On Fitting In Rabba Sara Hurwitz**

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The Mishna in Pirkei Avot, 5:21 provides a potential blueprint for Jewish life. The mishna teaches that at the age of 5, a child should be immersed in learning Torah; a ten year old must begin to learn Mishna.... an 18 year old must go to the chuppah and get married and at 20 one must pursue a livelihood ... a 90 year old is bent over, and at 100 it is as though he is dead.

This raises a tremendous number of questions. Although these milestones represent the communal standard in the 2nd century, it does not reflect our modern reality. It also discounts those who do not fall neatly into these categories. It does not account for the child who has a learning disability and cannot begin to learn Tanach by the age of five; the men and women who are not married by 18, or 25 or 35; the divorcee; the older person who is a vibrant senior and not bent over.

Does rabbinic literature offer a blueprint of how to respond and embrace each of these individuals?

The paradigm for someone who is out of sync with societal expectations is the *eved* (slave). A slave is not obligated to learn Torah, and therefore, does not begin studying torah at 5 and Talmud at 10. He is not bound by time sensitive commandments. Therefore, at the age of 13, he cannot become bound by all Mitzvot. A slave does not have the right to marry and since he does not own property, he cannot pursue a livelihood at age 20. He cannot give counsel, as a slave is forbidden from testifying in court. The very essence of a slave is someone who does not fit into the societal guidelines laid out in the Mishna in Pirkei Avot.

And indeed, the fact that we were once slaves in Egypt is fundamental to our identity. As it says in our parsha:

You shall not pervert the judgment of a proselyte or orphan, and you shall not take the garment of the widow as a pledge. Then the next pasuk: you shall remember that you were once slaves in Egypt (Devarim 24:17-18).

לֹא תִטֶּה מִשְׁפַּט גֵּר יְתוֹם וְלֹא  
תִּחַבֵּל בְּגָד אֵלְמִנָּה... וְזָכַרְתָּ כִּי  
עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ בְּמִצְרַיִם (דְּבָרִים  
כ"ד:יז-יח)

Remembering and reliving the Egypt experience fosters sensitivity to the vulnerable and provides the impetus for concern with the plight of the stranger. When kindness towards the stranger is mandated, it is often followed by the statement “you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Protecting the vulnerable is such a primary concept that the Talmud (Bava Metzia 59b), notes that the law to protect the stranger is mentioned no less than 36 times in the Torah. In purely quantitative terms, this exceeds any other law mentioned in the Torah, including the commandments to Love God and to observe Shabbat.

Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that “the Egyptian experience may therefore be regarded as the fountainhead and moral inspiration for the teaching of compassion which is so pervasive in Jewish law” (Reflections of the Rav). The goal of Jewish law is to cultivate people of compassion.

It is this empathy that compels us to remember that *we* were slaves in Egypt. We've all been in the position of the lonely and vulnerable. In fact Rashi, based on the Mechilta, explains that the terms "stranger, widow and orphan" are merely examples of a broader category of vulnerable people (Shemoth 22:21). They are symbols of the powerless and the oppressed. In essence, they are symbols of us. And haven't we all been in the position of feeling powerless and oppressed?

This leads to the quintessential reason for the imperative to remember that we were once slaves in Egypt. It reminds us of people who are out of sync with communal standards; to make us more aware and sensitive of people who do not fit in. And, if there is anyone who should understand what alienation means, it is us, for we too were once slaves. The *eved* resides in all of us. Thus, we are commanded to remember everyday that we should look out for the downtrodden, the poor, the lonely and the vulnerable—just as we once were out of sync with society, so too, today, we must be sensitive to people who are out of sync with communal standards.

A community must respond to individuals specific and special needs. To that end, I would like to incorporate the sensitivity that halacha mandates into our Mishna from Pirkei Avot. Our adapted mishna might say:

A child who reaches the age of 5, must interact with a person of 80. At 10 he should learn according to his ability; at 12 and 13 a child must begin to take responsibility for others. At age 15, she should learn Talmud and *derech eretz*, the laws of how to be a good person; at 18 he should seek companionship, but know that he has a lifetime to find the right match. At 20, she must learn how to pursue happiness through reaching out to others. At 30 we must make an extra effort to visit the homebound and those in hospital; at 40 we must be sensitive to the needs of the divorcee or the unmarried; At 70 we must reach out to those who are older than us. At 100, we should look backward at our full lives, and thank God for all that we are blessed with.

The test of a community is not how it receives the most powerful, but how it welcomes the most vulnerable. The goal should be to admit those who are powerful alongside those who are not; we must accept those who fit the paradigm of communal standards, but also those who are out of sync with communal norms.



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