



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

Resisting enslavement

What does it mean to be holy as God is holy; to live our earthly lives in partnership with the divine? This Torah portion shows Israel establishing a code of conduct that makes it 'different' in belief and custom to the surrounding cultures. Of particular interest to us in this discussion are the verses (18:1-5).

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: I am the Lord your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the Land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. (Leviticus 18:1-3)

These verses mark a change in style; not just rhythmically, but in the sense that Moses speaks very directly in the Lord's name, "I am the Lord," as distinct from the pattern in previous chapters, "This is what the Lord has said."

"I am the Lord your God." This phrase is repeated (18:2,4). Rashi¹ draws a connection between this and the verses that open the Ten Commandments where God also says, "I am the Lord your God." Says Rashi, the Lord is saying: Know who is speaking to you! It is I the Lord your God! At Mt Sinai you accepted my sovereignty, now

accept my rules of conduct.

To Be'er Yitzhak, "I am the Lord your God" recalls the 'powerful king' whose closeness to His people calls for complete obedience. To Meshekh Hokhmah the address is meant for each individual for personal benefit. God who created us knows our bodies and desires, and therefore when we follow God's rules we live in harmony with the way we were designed; we find body-spirit harmony. These are two complementary views, one emphasizing God as Creator, the other ourselves as created.²

Why does the text specifically warn against Egyptian and Canaanite customs? Surely their practices were no worse than other pagan nations. Why single them out?

Some traditional opinions are forthright in saying that in fact the conduct of these nations was exceptionally corrupt. Such a view is better understood if we recall that Egypt and Canaan are like 'book-ends' to the Israelites' desert passage. When enslaved in Egypt, they had witnessed a sophisticated society. The people they would meet upon arriving at the land of Canaan were likewise used to 'fine cities,' 'houses filled with all sorts of goods,' 'vineyards and olive groves' (Deut. 6:10-11). After years of wandering, one can imagine the Israelites being

attracted to this culture. Sums up Leibowitz, "As we know, material progress does not necessarily spell moral advancement.

Hence the Torah warns us, at the beginning of the chapter on forbidden relations, not to be dazzled by the external glitter of technological progress and lose sight of moral standards."³ After all, notes Be'er Yitzhak, if you imitate the Egyptians what was the point of God liberating you from Egypt?

Reflection

In your own life, have you ever experienced the dilemma of the Israelites as they left one form of slavery only to be tempted by another?

1. Rashi: revered medieval Torah scholar.

2. Be'er Yitzhak and Meshekh Hokhmah: 19th C. commentators, cited by Leibowitz, 244.

3. Leibowitz, 245.

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra*, Vol.1 (NY, 1996); Rashi: *Commentary on the Torah*, Vol. 3 (NY: Mesorah, 1999); Scripture: NRSV.