

Shoftim: The Innocent Heart

Ari Yovel, 8/22/15

Shabbat Shalom everyone. Thank you for coming and for your willingness to listen to me ramble for the next few minutes. First of all, a small side comment. Anyone in this room who's known me for longer than a few days is familiar with my ongoing time management issues. Therefore, it seems unfortunately appropriate that my bat mitzvah is happening at a delay of almost a decade. So, as most of you are used to hearing me say, sorry I'm late.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was born in Poland in 1907, the scion of a famous Hasidic dynasty. He received rabbinical ordination and pursued a doctorate from the University of Berlin, but mere weeks before the German invasion of Poland he was forced to escape to London and from there to New York. As a professor in the Jewish Theological Seminary, Rabbi Heschel dealt extensively with the subject of Jewish ethics, based on his belief that Judaism is a religion of actions and not merely words. This same conviction would bring him later to a city named Selma in 1965, to march alongside his friend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as part of the Civil Rights Movement fighting for racial equality in America. Of the experience, Heschel wrote a line whose meaning would echo throughout the years: "Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying."

The opening of this week's parsha presents a simple yet demanding command to the Jewish people: "Justice, justice shall you pursue." Pursuit is not a passive act. It is impossible to pursue something by accident, or without effort. In order to pursue something, one must deliberately follow the trail, constantly keep up the chase, and never lose sight of the target. It is difficult enough to pursue a physical thing. How hard is it, if so, to pursue a concept? Fortunately, this is not the task of any one person on their own, but rather the task of an entire nation, lasting forever.

Judaism has a long and rich history of involvement in the pursuit of justice. The laws governing agriculture, finance, and legal proceedings all include built-in support

systems for those on the edges of society: the poor, the stranger, the orphan and the widow. Over the course of centuries of persecution and ostracism, the Jewish mentality has evolved to be suspicious of authority and sympathetic towards those without resources or some means of defense. How else could a nation of perpetual immigrants feel, when before them stood other people who managed to fall between the cracks of the system, wherever they were?

In the interests of fairness, I must point out that the execution of these lofty ideas was never perfect. Even in the days when those same laws of justice were written, not everyone understood that they were more than just words on paper. Today as well, there are those who speak of justice and equality in theory as they sit with idle hands and do nothing to fulfill those ideas- or worse still, those who work against them. Every Yom Kippur, we hear the words of Isaiah shouting from the lines of the Haftarah, pointing out the hypocrisy of those who seek G-d through their faith and ignore Him in their daily acts: *"Will such be the fast I will choose, a day of man's afflicting his soul? Is it to bend his head like a fishhook and spread out sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast and an acceptable day to the Lord? Is this not the fast I will choose? To undo the fetters of wickedness, to untie the bands of perverseness, and to let out the oppressed free, and all perverseness you shall eliminate. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and moaning poor you shall bring home; when you see a naked one, you shall clothe him, and from your flesh you shall not hide."* (Isaiah 58: 5-7)

It is that last of Isaiah's demands that is the hardest to fulfill in my eyes- to not ignore those in need. With today's media exposure, the average person hears about suffering and hardship on the other side of the world as frequently as they see the beggar sitting on the sidewalk by their home. We are battered with constant and cutting reminders of every new conflict and struggle that comes into being. No amount of distraction and sugarcoating can take away that fact that sits in the back of our heads day and night: we live in a broken world. It is very far from perfect. It is filled with people seeking the right to be seen as human beings, the way to improve their quality of life, or how to get their next meal. It is filled with people who use the power given to them- through weapons or through words- to shove those beneath them further still into the

dirt. And this knowledge is draining. It is tiring, and it is jading. We have become so used to this reality that it no longer angers us, or saddens us, at all. We nod, say "it'll be all right", and go to sleep at night with a quiet conscience.

Because, after all, what can we do?

The very last verse I read from the Torah says simply, "Be *tamim* (innocent, wholehearted) with the LORD your G-d". The contradiction between the softness of innocence and the toughness of the pursuit from the first command I mentioned is the answer that today's society seeks. We cannot hold in our hearts the pain of the entire world, because it is too vast for us to deal with. In the face of reality, we must gather our strength and show fortitude. But in that moment of confrontation with the size of the problems before us, G-d reminds us that before Him, we must do the impossible. We must be soft, open, willing to believe despite everything we see that it can be different- that it can be better.

When I read this parsha, the story of the last few years of my life was reflected back to me. When my family moved to Israel a little over four years ago, I lost myself inside a sea of rage towards my parents for bringing me here, at Israeli society for being so different, and especially towards G-d for letting it all happen. Why did I deserve this?, I cried in my prayers. What sin did I commit that merits this kind of utter loneliness? I sank into deep bitterness, and I focused on how miserable I was and how no one could possibly understand how I felt. Being wrapped up in my own problems blinded me to the kindness of those trying to be close to me. My heart hardened, and one day I realized that I didn't actually care about anything anymore.

But isolating myself on purpose is tiring, and eventually I decided to look around the place I had been living in for several years. And when I opened my eyes, I stopped being sad and I started getting angry. Very, very angry. I read about Jews of every denomination and gender who wanted to read Torah on the women's side of the Kotel and were taken away in handcuffs, about LGBT+ youth who have to choose between living in the closet and living on the streets, about new Olim who are frustrated with a

difficult country that is unforgiving to whoever is new or just different. How could I be stuck in my own problems, I scolded myself, when there were so many other people who were suffering for similar reasons? I couldn't just sit and be miserable about it, so I started talking about it. And as some of the people here can attest, I haven't really stopped since. Day after day, step after step, my heart softened, and I found that my partners in the struggle were in fact my friends, people who had supported me and stood by me the whole time, and so I had never actually been alone. Not really.

So what is really included in the pursuit of justice? At the end of the day, what are we expected to do? G-d places before us two commands. The first: on the way to pursuing justice, as Rabbi Heschel would say, "pray with your feet". Stand up on your feet and speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. Raise your voice to call for justice and to point out wrongdoing. Go to a rally, give a coin to the beggar, vote in the elections, but whatever you choose to do, do *something*. The second: be innocent. Be soft. Be open. Do not let the experience of the past keep you from believing in a better future. Do not let the fact that others failed before keep us from trying. The day we surrender to that idea is the day we give up all hope of a change.

This vision is not a religious one. In order to pursue justice, we don't have to believe in G-d. We have to believe in humanity, and even more so- in ourselves.