

“I WILL STAND UP AS YOUR KINSMAN”

WHOM DO WE TREAT “LIKE FAMILY”?

TORAH BLESSING

DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

In the sermon, Rabbi Lorge quotes Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, who explains that when God promises to “redeem” the Israelites, God is promising to take on the role of a *go’el* – “a relative who regards the distress of his blood relation as his own and stands up for him.” Hirsch explains: “In Jewish law, the Goel comes to the aid of his kinsman when the latter has been forced by destitution to sell his inheritance or himself, and so has legally lost his freedom or his property. That is also God’s relation to us.” He therefore imagines God saying to the Israelites: “You do not have one kindred soul in Egypt who would feel *personally* hurt by abuses to which you are being subjected. Therefore I will stand up as your kinsman. I am hurt, whenever one of My children is hurt.”

Rabbi Lorge argues that God’s taking up this role of kinsman “is a radical revolution in the history of faith. All around the ancient Near East, the gods were at best indifferent to humanity and at worst capricious. But here, in Torah, we have a deity who loves humanity so much that God is willing to take on the role of family; to be bound by human suffering and need by bonds of obligation and commandedness.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What are your initial reactions to the idea of God as our redeeming kinsman?
- (b) Think about your own close relationships. What would it mean to know that God felt the same sense of kinship and obligation to you? To the Jewish people? To humanity?

Rabbi Lorge notes that God’s active role in this text “is not our experience of God or the world. We live in a world without . . . burning bushes, or splitting seas. None of us will receive a prophetic call. Instead, we carry this ancient text, and in its words we find echoes of truth and a voice calling us to be better than our nature. Today, all around us are people without a *go’el* . . . And yet, in this verse of Torah, God models for us an expectation. We Jews, having found freedom and been redeemed, must see those still oppressed, still vulnerable, still voiceless, as kin. Their hurt must be our hurt. Their plight our plight. Their need our need.

DISCUSSION QUESTION:

- (a) Do you agree that God's promise to act as a redeeming kinsman means that we, too, have that obligation?
- (b) Is it reasonable to expect that we will treat all of those who suffer as our kin? What stands in the way of our meeting this expectation?

ANOTHER VOICE:

In his 2007 Op-Ed, "Save the Darfur Puppy," *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof explores what moves us to act on behalf of others:

Time and again, we've seen that the human conscience just isn't pricked by mass suffering, while an individual child (or puppy) in distress causes our hearts to flutter.

In one experiment, psychologists asked ordinary citizens to contribute \$5 to alleviate hunger abroad. In one version, the money would go to a particular girl, Rokia, a 7-year-old in Mali; in another, to 21 million hungry Africans; in a third, to Rokia — but she was presented as a victim of a larger tapestry of global hunger.

Not surprisingly, people were less likely to give to anonymous millions than to Rokia. But they were also less willing to give in the third scenario, in which Rokia's suffering was presented as part of a broader pattern.

Evidence is overwhelming that humans respond to the suffering of individuals rather than groups. Think of the toddler Jessica McClure falling down a well in 1987, or the Lindbergh baby kidnapping in 1932 (which Mencken described as the "the biggest story since the Resurrection").

Even the right animal evokes a similar sympathy. A dog stranded on a ship aroused so much pity that \$48,000 in private money was spent trying to rescue it — and that was before the Coast Guard stepped in. And after I began visiting Darfur in 2004, I was flummoxed by the public's passion to save a red-tailed hawk, Pale Male, that had been evicted from his nest on Fifth Avenue in New York City. A single homeless hawk aroused more indignation than two million homeless Sudanese. . . .

One experiment underscored the limits of rationality. People prepared to donate to the needy were first asked either to talk about babies (to prime the emotions) or to perform math calculations (to prime their rational side). Those who did math donated less.

So maybe what we need isn't better laws but more troubled consciences — pricked, perhaps, by a Darfur puppy with big eyes and floppy ears. Once we find such a soulful dog in peril, we should call ABC News. ABC's news judgment can be assessed by the 11 minutes of evening news coverage it gave to Darfur's genocide during all of last year — compared with 23 minutes for the false confession in the JonBenet Ramsey case.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Can you think of a recent instance where the story of a single person made a more widespread problem seem more “real” or urgent for you? Were you spurred to act in some way?
- (b) Should we just accept the phenomenon Kristof cites as human nature? Or is there a way to more readily trouble our consciences on behalf of those in need?
- (c) Now that we know this, do we have an obligation to seek out stories that will cause us to act? How would we do that?

Now let us turn back to Samson Raphael Hirsch’s extrapolation of God’s promise to act as a “go’el” for the Israelites:

““You do not have one kindred soul in Egypt who would feel *personally* hurt by abuses to which you are being subjected. Therefore I will stand up as your kinsman. I am hurt, whenever one of My children is hurt.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Who, in today’s world, is totally powerless, with no one to stand up for them?
- (b) What would it take to step in and act as a *go’el* on their behalf? What might be a first step toward acting together to redeem these “kinsmen” from their plight?