

Care for Enemies

“When you come upon your enemy’s ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back. When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free” (Exodus 23:4-5).

These verses from the Book of Exodus resonate with the teaching of Jesus to ‘love your enemies.’ Examine them carefully. Read them aloud. Ponder the detail of the text. Note its setting: amidst rules against slander and the perversion of justice (23:1-3, 6-8) and concluding with a verse about protection of the stranger (23:9). Discuss your observations with a friend.

Why would these verses appear here? Perhaps because personal animosity has a tendency to lead to slander and false witness. Likewise, the stranger, the ‘outsider,’ is vulnerable to being treated as an enemy.

Note how this teaching is phrased as a case study. It is not a general prohibition against mistreatment of another; it calls for an actively positive response of returning good for evil and offers two concrete examples. The second example is especially pointed. Returning a stray beast (v.4) could be done via a third party while avoiding any contact with its owner. Raising the felled beast (v.5), however, requires direct contact with its owner as both parties engage in a common task for good.

Rabbinic commentators compare “When you come upon...” (v.4) with “When you see...” (v.5). Even if your enemy’s plight is seen from a distance you must leave your path and make your way to him to give assistance.

The phrase “and you would hold back” (v.5) also comes under the sages’ microscope. To overcome within oneself the instinct for evil is the moral task of every person. A just society is

built on lifegiving deeds, enacted even when one’s feelings dictate otherwise. In Jewish legal tradition we find this case:

If a friend requires help unloading his donkey, and an enemy requires help loading his—our first duty is to attend to our enemy in order to discipline our instincts.¹

Clearly, compassion for enemies is by no means unique to Christian teaching; it is embedded in Judaism. For example, in the story of the crossing of the Red Sea the Torah celebrates victory over the Egyptians, the oppressors of Israel. But an oft-quoted rabbinic commentary on this text describes the scene thus:

“The ministering angels wanted to sing a hymn at the destruction of the Egyptians, but God said, ‘My creatures are drowning and you are busy with song?’”²

Reflection

In the light of today’s Torah discussion reflect on your understanding of the teaching of Jesus to ‘love your enemies’ (Mt. 5:44).

1. Bava Mezia 32b. 2. Megillah 10b.

Bibliography: Larsson, *Bound for Freedom* (Mass., 1999); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (New York, 1996); Montefiore & Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (New York, 1974). Scripture: NRSV.

A note on the Gospel

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy’” (5:43).

In fact, the saying that Jesus quotes is not found in the Jewish Scriptures. It appears, however, in texts that form part of the Dead Sea Scrolls (ancient manuscripts discovered last century at Qumran, near the Dead Sea).

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