

Losing my Shoulder and Cultivating Compassion

Many of you have asked me: how is my shoulder? How did the surgery go? How is your arm? I have to say that immobilizing my left arm (yes, I am a lefty) for almost four weeks has not been easy. It's not comfortable; it hurts and there are many things – basic things – that I cannot do.

That said, I have learned a lot. I can brush my teeth (sort-of!) with my right hand – although it is easier to use the electric toothbrush! I can cut a slice of *hallah* – I put the knife in my left hand and hold the *hallah* in my right and then move the bread back and forth. A new twist on our Shabbat loaf!

One interesting moment occurred just the other day with a wonderful four-year-old Emunah preschooler. I bent down to say hello to her and she kind of looked at my arm, which was hidden by this large black contraption



that is immobilizing the shoulder. She just kind of looked and looked. I realized that it might be frightening to see your rabbi without an arm, so I

told her that just as she visits her doctor, I went to my doctor who fixed my shoulder and put it in this device so it could get better. Then I took my arm out so she could see it. She looked relieved.

But, I have actually learned a lot about compassion. I now have



greater empathy for people who are disabled or differently abled or simply cannot do something that I have taken for granted.

Since the surgery I have not been able to

drive. I have walked a fair amount to and from shul and even to lunch, coffee, and the bank

on Lexington Street in Waltham. The walking has been nice, though some days it has slowed me down, since it is slower or I have arrived at work or meetings sweaty.

I have been most blessed to have had so many of you offer and drive me to *shivah* minyans and homes, to meetings, or helped my family.

While I am incredibly grateful, I am also aware that this is work – work for our volunteers and, sometimes, it is even hard to accept this help. I now have a new understanding of the difficulty in making one's self vulnerable enough to accept help. This is not easy.

Some days, I took an Uber (very helpful and convenient, I should add) rather than try to find a ride due to the embarrassment I felt. It is hard to accept help; this experience has given me sympathy for those who find themselves often needing help, even as I have learned to accept the caring of others.



I also realize how car-dependent we are in our area and what extraordinary stress it must be to lose one's ability to drive due to injury, age or illness – that loss of freedom is tremendous.

This experience has made it hard to do other things as well – at first; I could not even dress myself unassisted. I am so blessed to have the love and support of Sharon and my kids – but it taught me a lot about being incapacitated.

So, while this has been a hard lesson, it has also been an important one. I have been reminded of how much compassion we should have towards others.

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This notion of compassion is also found in our *parashah*. At first



read, it is not readily visible in our *parashah*, our Torah reading. *Parashat Ki Tetzei*, which was my Bar-Mitzvah portion, 31 years ago is loaded with *mitzvot* – with commandments. In fact, it contains 72 *mitzvot*, the most of any *parashah* in the Torah. As we read through them, they do not always seem to be teaching compassion. They are often strict and harsh, reflecting the world of thousands of years ago more than ours today. Thankfully, our rabbis – some 2,000 years ago – mitigated these punishments in their interpretations of these laws of the Torah.

As I read and studied this *parashah* this week, a couple of laws stood out to me. Towards the end of the reading, we find:

¹⁰When you make a loan of any sort to your countryman, you must not enter his house to seize his pledge. ¹¹You must remain outside, while the man to whom you made the loan brings the pledge out to you. ¹²If he is a needy man, you shall not go to sleep in his pledge; ¹³you must return the pledge to him at sundown, that he may sleep in his cloth and bless you; and it will be to your merit before Adonai your God. (Deuteronomy 24:10-13)

As Rabbi Kushner writes in our *Etz Hayim Humash*, if the creditor entered the home of the debtor, he and his family would be humiliated.

In addition, the Torah instructs us not to keep the pledge – if it is a coat and it is cold, you must go back each evening and give it back so the person does not get too cold!

The Torah also utilizes a noteworthy formulation to emphasize the importance of this sensitive behavior: “*ulekha tehiyeh tzedakah lefnei Adonai eloheikha* – it [behaving in this manner – not entering the debtor’s home] will be to your credit before Adonai your God.”

We are taught to be compassionate to those who are destitute – to those who have fallen on the fringes of the economic spectrum. But we are also taught that “God is the ultimate patron of the powerless.”

A few verses later, we read:

¹⁷You shall not subvert the rights of the stranger or the fatherless; you shall not take a widow’s garment in pawn.

¹⁸Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and that Adonai your God redeemed you from there; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment. (Deuteronomy 24:17-18)

And then we learn that when you are harvesting:

²⁰When you beat down the fruit of your olive trees, do not go over them again; that shall go to the stranger, the fatherless, and the

widow. ²¹When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not pick it over again; that shall go to the stranger, the fatherless, and the



widow. ²²Always remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment.

(Deuteronomy 24:20-22)

Always remember that you were a slave in Egypt.

A slave in Egypt?!?

Now, of course, this is not literally true. However we may understand this text, it is not literally true. If we believe that the book of Deuteronomy was literally Moshe's last speech to the Israelites before he died, these Israelites were not in Egypt – they are their children born during the 40 years of wandering. Further, if, like most modern biblical scholars, we understand the book of Deuteronomy as a much later work from King

Josiah's time – some 800 years later – it is not certainly not speaking literally.

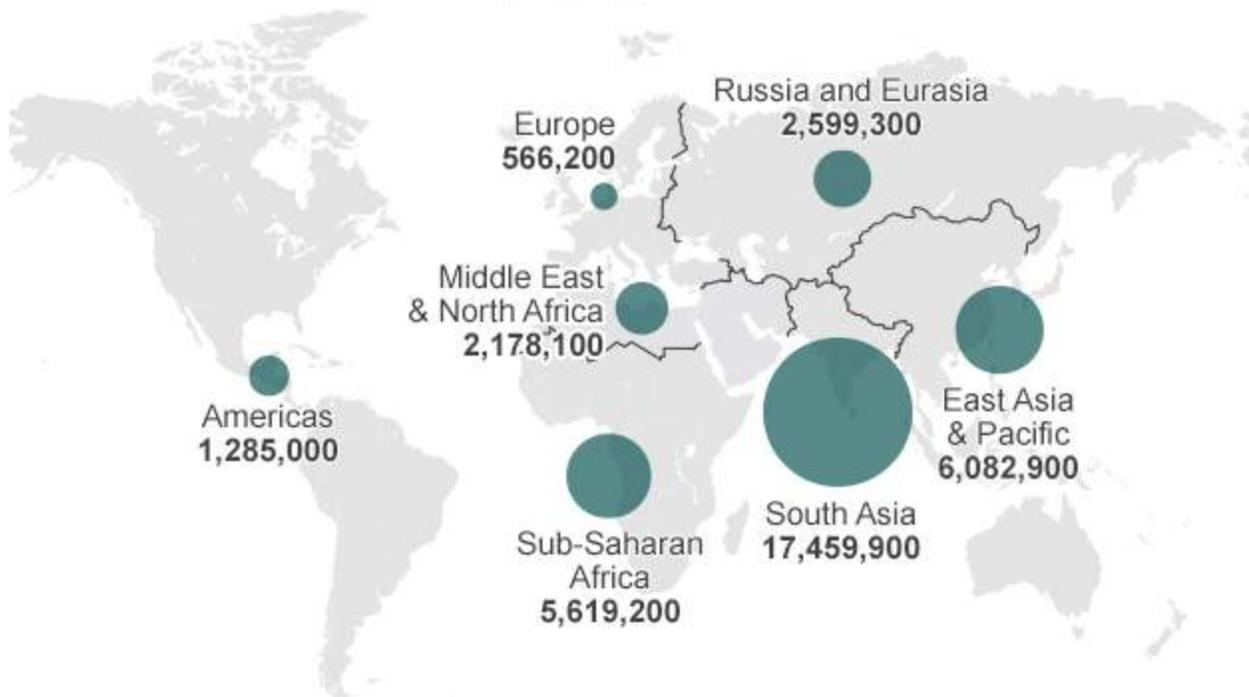
These texts are directed to the children of our ancestors who were slaves; it is speaking to Jews 2,600 years ago and, most importantly, it is speaking to us today! We have to try to feel what it was like to be a slave. That is what we are asked to do on *Pesah* each year at the seder.



B'khol dor vador hayav adam lir'ot et atzmo k'elu hu yatzah mi-mitzrayim – in every generation, we are REQUIRED to see ourselves as if we left Egypt.

This does two things: first, it helps us feel free. To feel freedom, we need the opposite – we need to feel enslaved. Just as we must work during the six days of the week in order to experience Shabbat, we must feel some degree of slavery in order to feel free.

Number of people living in slavery, by region



Source: Global Slavery Index 2014

Second, it teaches us to identify with those who are enslaved. Even if we are lucky enough not to have been slaves, we must remember that we were slaves – maybe it is not literally ourselves, but we should imagine what that must be like. We are asked to feel a kinship with those who are slaves in our world, with those who are on the fringes of society.

That is not easy to do. It is not easy to identify with those who are weak, who are poor, who are sick. But, we are asked to do just that.

How?

Spend time each day thinking about how can we help them or better yet, devote ourselves and/or our resources to making life better for them.

In our shul, we are blessed to have an active Hineni Committee and Hineni Care Team; together, they both help people who need rides and other assistance and visit those who are ill or at home.

I must note that there are also people on the fringes in many places around the world: in Israel, there are migrants from Sudan and Eritrea; Syrian and Iraqi refugees were in the news this week seeking shelter in parts of Europe and we should all be appalled by some of the hateful rhetoric that has foisted itself into the political debate about how to treat illegal immigrants in our own country.

For me, the last month has been a bit of a struggle. But I have to say, that it has taught me a tremendous amount. I have lived a somewhat impaired existence and that in turn, has made me more sensitive to those who live with challenges.

While I pray that I heal over the coming months, I pray that we all cultivate more compassion and sensitivity to all those enslaved or on the margins of our society – let us remember that we were or even are all slaves in the land of Egypt – just like our ancestors.