

Edah Staff:

Rabbi Saul Berman,
Director

Rabbi Bob Carroll,
Program Director

Rachel Craig,
Administrator

Marisa Yammer,
Asst. Program
Director

Esther Berman,
Administrative
Assistant

Edah Happenings:

**Israel
Conference-
Sun. Oct. 23rd
in Jerusalem**

**Regional
Conference in
Montreal- Nov.
11th -13th**

**Regional
Conference in
Boston- Nov.
18th -20th**

**Torah for Elul @
JCC in
Manhattan
Sept. 27th**

**Edah College
Conference Feb.
17-19**

Katrina and Torah of Kindness

By Rabbi Saul J. Berman

From the beginning of the Book of Devarim, every single weekly portion has contained some specific legislation for the protection of the weak, the underprivileged, the poor.

In Parshat Devarim, at Deut. 1:16-17, the demand of fairness in judicial process even to the alien.

In Parshat VaEtchanan, at Deut. 5:14-15, the command that even aliens and servants be allowed to rest on the Shabbat, because we remember what it was like to be aliens and slaves.

In Parshat Ekev, at Deut. 10:19, the Mitzvah of loving the stranger, because we were strangers in the land of Egypt.

In Parshat Re'eh, at Deut. 14:29, the duty to pay the tithe for support of the poor. Also in that Parsha, at Deut. 15:7-11, the duty to lend to the poor and to provide "dei machsoro," "that which he lacks."

In Parshat Shoftim, at Deut. 20:1-9, the ceremony of expiation of communal failure of responsibility, when an anonymous victim of homicide is found outside a town.

In Parshat Ki Tetze, at Deut 23:16, a runaway slave is protected; at 24:10-11 a debtor is protected from intrusion into his home by the creditor; at 24:14-15 immediate payment of day laborers is demanded; and at 24:19 the poor are assured access to agricultural produce at the time of harvest. All of this is motivated by the demand that we remember what it felt like to be slaves in the land of Egypt.

And in Parshat Ki Tavo, at Deut 26:1-11, the Torah commands us to recite the Vidui Bikkurim, the verbal affirmation of our awareness of the Divine goodness which produced our harvest. At the conclusion of that declaration the Torah says, "And you shall rejoice with all of good which the Lord your God gave to you and your household – you and the Levite and the alien who is amongst you." This sense of inclusiveness and sharing, out of appreciation of the gifts which God has given us, is fundamental to the Jewish understanding of individual responsibility to the poor and the dislocated.

This past week I spent from Thursday through Sunday

in Houston, Texas. I taught Torah at the United Orthodox Synagogues, led so ably by Rabbi Barry Gelman, and at the Robert Beren Jewish High School, and I visited the area of the Astrodome where the remaining evacuees from New Orleans are being housed and supported. But I learned infinitely more than I taught over that weekend.

I learned what it means for an entire Jewish community to actualize the Torah's teachings about caring for the poor, the stranger and the dislocated. I saw a Jewish Federation at its best, able to bring together the entire community to share its resources, to house, to feed, to clothe, to counsel, to provide medical care, job opportunities, Day School placements for children, and religious support. I saw a Jewish community united in deeply cooperative spirit to fulfill the Torah's high expectation, that we learn from our own historical experience to be sensitive to the alien and the underprivileged.

I saw Rabbis, doctors, housewives, social workers, teachers, community organization professionals, lawyers, and business men and women - all overworked to begin with- add hours to their days to provide sensitive and loving care to families and individuals who found themselves suddenly homeless and without the simplest rudiments of normal life. What an extraordinary Kiddush Hashem! What an unusually broad and deep integration of the Divine quality of Chesed, kindness, into daily life!

It is striking that God identifies Himself, in the 13 Divine Attributes (Names), as Rav Chessed, great in kindness. The greatness of God's kindness resides in its individualized nature. God, knowing the precise and true needs of every individual, is able to respond not from a single template of needs, but from an accurate assessment of the distinctive needs of each individual. The Torah commands us to do the same in our treatment of the poor when it insists, in Deut. 15:8, that we provide, "dei machsoro asher yechsar lo," "in accordance with the very thing that person lacks."

I saw the openness of heart which is necessary to fulfill the verse in parshat Ki Tavo, Deut. 26:11, which instructs us to include the alien in our rejoicing. That openness needs to be admired and nourished, and the community in which it was manifest needs to be proud of their spiritual achievement.

Rabbi Saul J. Berman, Director of Edah, teaches Jewish Law at Stern College and at Columbia University School of Law.

Democracy and Jewish Identity After the Disengagement

By Rabbi Yehuda Gilad

The disengagement from the Gaza Strip and northern Samaria initiated by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon exposed and exacerbated a deep schism in Israeli society. Nonetheless, if each side of this argument can employ the necessary responsibility and fairness to confront the heart of its own argument in the eye of the storm, and draw the necessary conclusions, there may be hope yet for renewed unity in Israel.

The disengagement plan sprung from the realization that the two elemental concepts touted by the Israeli right and left wing for the past few decades no longer hold water. The left thought that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could be solved in our generation through a land-for-peace deal. At the same time, the Israeli rights conviction that the popular Palestinian uprising could be suppressed by employing just a little more force, thereby enabling Israel to continue to rule over Judea, Samaria, and Gaza, was also proven incorrect.

In order to maintain over time a Jewish, democratic state as defined in Israel's Basic Laws, the country cannot practically or morally rule over more than three million Palestinians. If Israel grants voting rights to all Palestinian residents, the country will quickly turn into a bi-national state and lose its Jewish character. On the other hand, if those rights are denied the Palestinians, Israel compromises its democratic principles, and becomes essentially an apartheid society.

Some political trauma was inevitable: it's hard to find a precedent in human history, particularly among democratic societies, for a unilateral, sovereign decision by a state to destroy civilian settlements in which thousands of its own citizens legally reside. But the political process involved has intensified divisions rather than initiating healing.

The manner in which the decision was made is extremely problematic on moral and public policy grounds. While the plan is clearly legal from a formal democratic standpoint, as both the Knesset and the government approved it, opponents of the disengagement legitimately believe that the process was not fair and not truly democratic. Ariel Sharon was elected on the basis of his strident opposition to unilateral withdrawal from Gaza. His 180 degree turnaround, coupled with his strong opposition to allowing a plebiscite or referendum to decide the issue, and the widespread belief that his Knesset and government majorities were achieved with the help of pressure and manipulation, have badly shaken many citizens faith in the state and its institutions.

Nonetheless, the rift within the population is more significant than the rift with the state, and must be solved for the political process to be rehabilitated. The most biting disagreement in Israeli society is between the secular majority, made up of the left and the pragmatic right led by Sharon, and the large minority on the right, made up primarily of members of the religious Zionist community. The former see the state as secular and democratic; the latter, Modern Orthodox Jews who are completely involved in the secular state, believe that the State of Israel is the first flowering of the redemption promised by God

through His prophets. Their disagreement about the disengagement can be seen as flowing naturally and inevitably from first principles. Paradoxically, however, each side has built its position on ideas that usually serve the other camp. The religious Zionist community, which assiduously strives to influence the Jewish nature of the country, has chosen to steer clear almost entirely of the following question: How can Israel remain a Jewish state in the future while ruling over 3.5 million Palestinians?

Religious Zionist opposition to the disengagement has centered on flaws in the democratic process without providing a serious assessment of the implications of continued occupation for the Jewishness of the Israeli state.

On the other hand, Israel's secular majority, which usually avoids public debate concerning the status Jewish identity, and focuses instead on Israel's character as a democratic, Western society, has chosen to ignore the deficiencies in the democratic process used by the Prime Minister to wrangle approval for the disengagement plan.

The secular majority justifies the disengagement primarily because of the demographic issue. If Israel wants to remain a Jewish, democratic state, they claim, there is no recourse but to end our rule of the Palestinian people.

The apparent paradox of each side using the others arguments is actually an opportunity for reconciliation and rebuilding. The challenge we are faced with is to make use of the basic elements of the schism dividing us to cultivate new common ground for Israeli society as a whole. If we accept this challenge, there is hope for renewed unity in Israel.

The national religious community must internalize democratic commitments and the importance of the humanistic values that lay at the foundation of the democratic world view. They must learn to balance between redemptive religious vision as a source of inspiration and aspiration, and the realistic, pragmatic policy determined by democratic decision-making and society.

Secular Israelis, on the other hand, must stop leaving Jewish matters up to the religious public. They must finally address the issue of Israel's Jewish identity, and identify the Jewish national, cultural, and spiritual content they would use to shape the character of Israel as a Jewish and democratic society. Processes such as these would contribute much to a new dialogue in Israel. This dialogue could create a core agreement in the Israeli Jewish community, and help to identify joint social and cultural challenges toward combining democracy and Jewish identity. Addressing those challenges appropriately could present new and promising horizons for Israeli society.

Rabbi Yehuda Gilad is the rabbi of Kibbutz Lavi and one of the heads of the Religious Kibbutz movements yeshiva at Maale Gilboa. Rav Gilad is also a former member of Knesset and one of the leaders of the new movement "Tafnit".

“There may be hope yet for renewed unity in Israel.”

Edah

45 West 36th Street, 10th Floor

New York, NY 10018

www.edah.org

1-212-244-7501

