



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Shemini 5768

By Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla

March 29, 2008

I currently serve as a chaplain in a locked ward in a psychiatric hospital. A patient of mine named “John” was recently discharged from the unit. As he was leaving, he told me that the time he had spent there was the first time in his life that he had felt truly free. I was dumbfounded when he said this, as John had been hospitalized on an involuntary, court-ordered, 14-day hold and had arrived kicking and screaming. He explained to me, however, that he had come to see that despite the locks on the doors and windows, his time on the unit was the first time in his life he had ever been in a truly safe place. “The locked doors do not just keep patients in,” John told me. “They also keep violence out.”

The sense of freedom that John experienced during his stay was not just about physical containment, but was also due to some of the limits placed on his time. The unit runs a full schedule of individual and group therapy. John had never experienced being listened to so intensely. The opportunity to be listened to compassionately by staff and peers made John feel free to express himself and begin to see his own worth and dignity. The rigid schedule actually liberated him and allowed room for healing.

John taught me that not all limits are limiting. Boundaries can also allow for safe space, sanctuary, where healing can happen and human dignity can flourish. This is a message that is deeply embedded in Torah. In the Book of Leviticus, we are taught to build sacred boundaries in space through the *Mishkan* (tabernacle). We are instructed to establish boundaries in time through the observance of Shabbat. And, in this week’s *parshah*, we learn biblical dietary laws that set boundaries around what we eat.

In *Parshat Shemini*, we are taught to avoid eating many animals, including crawling insects, shrimp, hares, swine, bustards, storks, herons of every variety, hoopoes and bats.¹ We are told that sea creatures must have fins and scales, land animals must chew their cud and have true hoofs. No explanation for these apparently random biblical dietary laws is given. Throughout Jewish history, our sages have puzzled over this mysterious *parshah* looking for underlying principles. Maimonides, the 12th century philosopher and physician, suggests that this mystifying list of forbidden foods is based on principles of nutrition and reflects an awareness of the importance of the health and vigor of the human body as a sacred vessel.² Other classical medieval commentators, such as Sforno and Nachmanides, theorize that the point of these restrictions is to protect the spiritual (as opposed to physical) health of the people of Israel, to separate us from the other nations and to teach us gentleness toward creation.³

What all these commentaries have in common is an acknowledgement that, whatever the rationale might be behind the laws of *kashrut*, what we eat has an impact on how we live and reflects our values. Creating boundaries in our eating teaches us to eat mindfully and to carefully weigh the impact of our food on our bodies, our communities and the world.

¹ Leviticus 11:14-19

² Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, 3:48

³ Nachmanides and Sforno on Leviticus 11:13

In the contemporary global village, the Torah's message to limit what we eat can and should include consideration of the impacts of our food choices on global social justice. The commercial coffee industry, for example, chronically underpays and mistreats workers in the Global South, and the low labor standards of the industry as a whole impact the well-being of entire economies in the world's poorest countries. Purchasing non-fair trade coffee and other forms of produce picked by underpaid workers conflicts with this *parshah's* message to choose foods mindfully.

This portion challenges us to express our most intimate and deeply held values with every mouthful. It asks us to speak out against the exploitation of farmers and laborers in the Global South and to insist upon foods and drinks for our homes, our synagogues and our workplaces that are traded fairly and that promote the values of the Torah – compassion and justice for all living creatures.

As my patient John taught me, limits are not always limiting. Limits create space for both individual and world healing. Boundaries around how we live and what we eat help to create a world where there is room for that within each of us that is truly limitless to safely unfold – our human dignity and our capacity for true freedom.



Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla is a Chaplain Resident at the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF) Medical Center and Langley Porter Psychiatric Institute. He is also an activist, writer, organizer and educator. He has lectured and led workshops on gender and sexual diversity in Judaism throughout Israel, Canada and the U.S. Before moving to San Francisco, Elliot served as the rabbi of the Danforth Jewish Circle, Toronto's social justice-oriented synagogue. Elliot was ordained by Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 2006. He can be reached at ekukla@gmail.com.

©2008 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit www.ajws.org/parshah.

The writers of the Dvar Tzedek are the inaugural recipients of the Lisa Goldberg Memorial Fellowship. As President of the Charles S. Revson Foundation and as a mother, wife, colleague and friend, Lisa Goldberg had a profound commitment to social justice and the Jewish community. She died tragically at the age of 54. Lisa was a good friend and generous supporter of AJWS, and we hope that, through these words of tzedek, we can contribute to her legacy.

AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author. The AJWS Torah Commentary series is made possible in part by funds granted by the Charles H. Revson Foundation.

45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e ajws@ajws.org • www.ajws.org