For Ourselves and for Others:Thoughts for Parashat Beshallah, February 4, 2012

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By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

A major theme in Jewish liturgy and religious observance is “zekher litsiyat mitsrayim”—in remembrance of the exodus from Egypt. The exodus was a central event that has profoundly impacted on the destiny of Israel. It ties together vital ideas: the providence of God; the election and nationhood of Israel; the victory of good over evil; the importance of prayer and song in expressing gratitude to the Almighty.

Rabbi Nissim Gerondi, a leading sage of 15th century Spain, taught that the slavery experience was intended to purify Israel, to impress upon us the evils of oppression. We learned that we were to be kind to the stranger, for we ourselves were strangers in the land of Egypt. From this first-hand experience, we were to learn an unflinching commitment to righteousness to our fellow human beings. If Jews throughout the ages have been at the forefront of compassion and social justice, much of the credit belongs to our commitment to “zekher litsiyat mitsrayim.”

This commitment extends not only to fellow religionists, but to humanity as a whole. A striking example occurred in New York on March 8, 1847.

Hazan Jacques Judah Lyons of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City took the lead in organizing a community event to raise funds for Irish famine relief. Members of New York’s Jewish community gathered at Shearith Israel, where Hazan Lyons gave an inspiring appeal to help the starving Irish. He recognized that the Jewish community had plenty of needs of its own. “We are told that we have a large number of our own poor and destitute to take care of, that the charity which we dispense should be bestowed in this quarter…that self-preservation is a law and principle of our nature.”

Yet, Hazan Lyons rejected this attitude. Yes, we must care for our own; but this does not preclude our offering help to those beyond our community who are also in need of assistance. He spoke of a connecting link between us and the Irish sufferers: “…that connecting link is strong enough and long enough to withstand

all attempts to make the separation [between us and them] complete and irreparable.…Forged as it was by religion, virtue, and charity, it is indestructible, it is all powerful. That link, my brethren, is HUMANITY! Its appeal to the heart surmounts every obstacle. Clime, color, sect are barriers which impede not its progress thither."

As Jews, we must care for our fellow Jews. As human beings, we must care for our fellow human beings. This is a large challenge, and not always easily balanced.

Maimonides (Laws of Gifts for the Poor 7:13) provided an order of priority in our charitable giving. One's relatives take priority over others. The poor of one's household have priority over the poor of the town; the poor of one's town have priority over the poor of other towns. A general rule is that the poor of the land of Israel are given the same priority as the poor of one's own town.

While it is a priority to help those closest to us, this does not exempt us from helping a wider range of humanity. As Jews who remember our servitude in Egypt, we cannot be callous to the needs of others, to the cries of strangers.

One of the problems confronting contemporary American Jewish philanthropy is that Jews may have become too "universal"—offering vast amount of charity to non-Jewish causes, while not providing enough for the specifically Jewish needs. American Jews surely support many Jewish causes here, in Israel and throughout the world. But vast amounts of Jewish philanthropy are devoted to universities, cultural institutions, non-Jewish charities, humanitarian causes. While these are worthy causes, our philanthropic dollars should reflect at least an equal commitment to the Jewish people.

If we do not look out for ourselves, who will? But if we only look out for ourselves, then we have missed the key lesson of "zekher litsiyat mitsrayim"—the lesson that has molded us into a compassionate, sensitive and kind people.

Angel for Shabbat