Overcoming the Negatives: Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tetsei

View PDF



Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ki Tetsei

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“Do not abhor an Egyptian because you were a stranger in his land” (Devarim 23:8).

This passage is generally understood to mean that we should not hold a permanent grudge against Egyptians, since we were strangers in their land and they provided us with some benefits. This is a highly problematic understanding of the verse. The Israelites suffered for generations as slaves in Egypt. They were treated cruelly; their male children were cast into the river to die. It is a very far stretch to imagine that we should be grateful to them for their hospitality! Should we be commanded not to abhor Nazis because we were “strangers” in their concentration camps?

I translate this verse differently: “Do not abhor the Egyptian *even though* you were a stranger in his land.” The Torah is teaching: although the Egyptians enslaved you, you must not let your animosity to them be permanent. You must get past your wounds. The Torah states: “The children of the third generation that are born to them may enter into the assembly of the Lord.” Yes, it will take several generations for the bitter memories to heal, but Egyptians will be welcome to join the Israelites in due course.

But this leads to another problem. Even if we overcame our animosity and were prepared to let Egyptian grandchildren join our people, why would any Egyptian want to do so? In the Egyptian memory, the Israelites were despised slaves who

brought plagues on Egypt. Why would an Egyptian want to leave Egypt, resettle in the land of the Israelites, and become part of their people?

The Torah assumes that there will be such Egyptians! For whatever reason, some Egyptian grandchildren will be drawn to the Israelite nation. Perhaps they will come because of guilt feelings over the past persecution of Israelites; perhaps they will be drawn to Israelite faith, culture, civilization. And when these unique individuals turn up among the Israelites, they are to be welcomed and embraced.

During my many years in the rabbinate, I have been privileged to know special people who, like the unique Egyptians of old, have overcome a heritage of animosity toward Jews/Judaism and have joined the Jewish People. A former member of the Ku Kux Klan was drawn to Judaism by studying the Bible carefully and reading about Jewish teachings (including some of my writings). He converted to Judaism and became a leader of his Jewish community. A woman raised in an Arab country, taught from childhood to despise Jews and Israel, came to the United States to attend college, met Jews, realized that Jews were actually very good people. She ultimately converted to Judaism, married an Israeli, and sent her children to an Orthodox Day School. A man raised to believe that Jews could not be admitted into heaven, overcame this hateful teaching, studied Judaism, undertook an Orthodox conversion, married a Jewish woman. I have personally known many other people raised with anti-Jewish attitudes—who have become active and enthusiastic members of the Jewish People.

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed, in his book on conversion, writes: “If a German or an Arab seeks to join the Jewish people, even if the child of a fierce anti-Semite, we should accept them and love them like any other Jew. Moreover, we should love them even more than other Jews, in keeping with the commandment to “love the convert, for you too were strangers in the land of Egypt (Deuteronomy 10:19).”

The Torah commands us not to harbor endless hatred for those who have persecuted us. It also teaches us that there are really wonderful people who overcome the hateful anti-Jewish stereotypes of their families/societies, and who embrace Judaism and the Jewish People. And we embrace them for their wisdom and courage. We need more of them. Am Yisrael Hai, Od Avinu Hai.